ABOUT SPECTRUM

Spectrum is a journal established in 1969 to encourage Seventh-day Adventist participation in the discussion of contemporary issues from a Christian viewpoint, to look without prejudice at all sides of a subject, to evaluate the merits of diverse views, and to foster intellectual and cultural growth. Although effort is made to ensure accurate scholarship and critical judgment, the statements of fact are the responsibility of contributors, and the views individual authors express are not necessarily those of the editorial staff as a whole or as individuals.

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ABOUT THE COVER ART
Loved for Years
Women’s Devotional Bible Classic, New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).
Materials: Bible, cast bronze, solder, metal dye, acrylic
Date: 2022

ABOUT THE ARTIST
John N. McDowell is an artist and poet who lives in Lacombe, Alberta, Canada. He also serves as a professor of English and as dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Burman University. He is a juried member of both the Alberta Artist’s Society and The Sculptors’ Society of Canada.

ARTIST’S STATEMENT
The Bible has always been read, understood, and used within historical and societal contexts. The Bible has served—and continues to serve—as an important cultural artifact surfeited with the weight of individual and corporate exactitudes of spiritual, religious, and moral “Truth.” I am making a visual record of the many ways the Bible is embedded within cultural attitudes and values—the ways it is read and “used.”

“Loved for Years,” is part of this ongoing series and is provocative and perhaps heretical by depicting the crucified Christ as female. In part, it represents a challenge to the viewer to rethink views on the nature of Christ. It was also a reaction to the condescending product description of the women’s Bible made by the publishers: “Thousands of women wake up to coffee and Bible study with Joni Eareckson Tada, spend their lunch breaks having devotions with Debby Boone, and get spiritual advice from Ruth Bell Graham before turning in at night. That’s hard to believe considering the busy schedules of these well-known women, not to mention their admirers. It’s surprising they get time to read the Word at all. . . .”
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Together, we continue to grow.

This summer three interns will work for *Spectrum*.

**Tiara Best**, a theology major at Washington Adventist University, writes that she “wants to use her gifts of shepherding, teaching, and writing to uplift those around her.” She adds that she “feels called to pastoral ministry, administrative leadership, and authorship.”

**Grace No**, an English major at Andrews University, writes that she plans to pursue a career that “combines my passion for English literature with aspects of my Adventist faith and increasing our education about marginalized identities and diversity.”

**Matthew Orquia**, a journalism major at Southern Adventist University, is currently the managing editor for the student paper, *Southern Accent*. He writes that he hopes, “to continue working in journalism and use the profession as a way to learn more about the world. I am especially interested in long-form journalism and projects where reporters have time to understand their topic in detail.”

In addition, several Adventist graduate students will receive small research grants this summer to work with the interns and the *Spectrum* team.

Many of you donated to our successful Grow the Vision fundraising campaign. This is part of your money in action. Thank you for your generosity. All of this will further integrate ideas and build community, which we readers of *Spectrum* love. That’s the vision: we’re growing a multi-generational, globally focused organization looking for the best in Adventism.

This issue’s focus on theological questions and Adventist studies offers examples of that excellence. Within these pages, I hope you find new insights and further extend your own vision of what Adventism means to you.

As we add members to this community, we see more clearly what Adventism offers the world. As *Spectrum* grows its influence, denominational self-knowledge increases and those who run to and fro see that the end does not justify the means. Instead, each Adventist act reveals our ethical values. Mindless growth for its own sake mimics cancer. But expanding intellectual, social, and spiritual vision prevents many ills. At its clearest, we receive the grace of meaning and mission.

Most importantly—as you read this first issue in the fifty-second volume of *Spectrum*’s shared story of Adventism—know you are not alone.
Fearful Fortification or Joyful Walk?

In his latest book,* Jon Meacham explores Abraham Lincoln’s evolving understanding of equality, and the complexity involved as he sought it in a polarized context. Once he became president, Lincoln’s identity unfolded in a way that met the moment as he discerned possibilities with courage in unfathomable situations. His identity shifted and adapted when he discerned the journey before him.

On a recent Adventist Voices podcast, religion reporter Bob Smietana showed a need for adaptability in Adventism when he described Adventists as trying to give answers to questions the world is not asking. This is like providing a solution to a calculus problem for people who have no interest in the subject. Adventists seem stuck in a fearful fortification.

However, Adventism can soar beyond the certainty of time charts and named enemies to find the universal concepts about God that will nourish people now. A healthy Adventist future must provide space for growth. Reality constantly challenges. In Scripture, we see God’s responsive faithfulness as he lives among people. For Adventists to be relevant, it is time for fearless exploration of the beauty about God’s character.

Ever since Spectrum adopted the slogan “community through conversation,” we have received a constant drumming of concern from folks who fear conversation. Might an open discussion cause some to lose cachet amongst the in-group that currently wields power? Does fear of divine retribution squelch conversation, leaving people in a place with an irrelevant worldview based on a flat biblical interpretation? Is growth stunted by fear, lest some new understanding push against traditional prescribed boundaries?

Maybe a conversation would dilute the unique Adventist culture that too often tilts to comprehensive certainty. Social identity theory says people tend to feel comfortable when they belong to a delineated group where identities are secure, unchallenged. Yet, Jesus lived in a way that pervasively questioned and challenged identities of those in, and out, of the kingdom. A proud, hardened group identity is anti-gospel. We must embrace the admonition “fear not,” even if making space for conversation could push against the narrow identity that has cloaked Adventism for too long.

Spectrum has embraced the metaphor of walking to symbolize the journey of life in the Way of Jesus. Walking gives cadence to conversation and can ease the way to honest sharing. Spectrum readers who walked St. Cuthbert’s Pilgrimage with us last summer named conversations as their most treasured memories of the experience. The journey took us somewhere, yet conversation also moved and formed us. Good conversation leads to change, understanding, transformation—to growth.

People were created to walk and converse, starting in Eden, with Sabbath as a defined time for conversation. God walked with Enoch and with Noah. Jesus walked with disciples, using conversation on the road to Emmaus to clear a path for transformation. The Lord bids us “walk in the way of love” (Eph 5:1).

Authentic Adventist movement flows from blessed hope. A healthy Church will move with trust in God, avoiding fear-based stagnation, seeking multi-faceted synergy to meet the moment. Let’s cultivate discipleship—flourishing in Christ. We know that people can develop and learn; surely the Adventist Church can, too. Remove fearful fortification. Open a way for conversation to be a joyful walk.

Let’s talk. Let’s move. Let’s go. The Sabbath afternoon walk might well be a prophetic prescription.


Carmen Lau is board chair of Adventist Forum.
Questions FOR Theology
I remember the girl, eight years old, trembling beneath a towering, gray-haired madman teacher. To the left of her outstretched arms, twenty-four students held their breath. “One, two, three,” the voice thundered into her ears, “eight, nine, ten.” His thin stick struck into her palms. It happened only on Monday mornings at eight.

She swallowed her tears and walked to her seat in the third row. With fingers sore and throbbing, she picked up the pencil. Each letter had to be neat and on the line; the numbers had to fit perfectly inside the small, square boxes. Sabbath! It was because of Sabbath. He was furious. She was in a different world.

At home, her mother’s eyes filled with tears. Father took her hands and held them. From that day on, he would hold her hands, always and everywhere. And so, Monday mornings happened again.

Sabbath is a remarkable thing. She comes from a place which no human commands nor conquers. My angry teacher in 1970s Romania never got ahold of her. But neither have I. Whenever I write and speak about...
Sabbath, I fear I may bring insult on what God has made holy, for I have no command over her, and I have surely not conquered her. Nevertheless, I desire to know her. When I prepared for this essay, I was compelled to open my German Bible. I have a Luther Bible, the 1984 edition. It is the classic German translation. The year of publication coincides with my family’s emigration from Romania to West Germany. I acquired this Bible when I was a student in the Seminary in Bogenhofen, Austria. When I received the news that my father needed surgery for a malignant brain tumor, I wrote on the first blank page of my Bible: “Broken, to be made beautiful.” He passed away too soon, and Sabbath slipped away, too. It is easy to go about life, even life as a minister, without missing her because Sabbath does not come to us like an intruder, forcing her way in. Nor does she occupy space like a frozen stone in a landscape or like a sculpture celebrating hero-like triumphs of the past.

Sabbath’s memory is of a different kind. She objects to our long-held claim that “history is written by the victors.” Sabbath has built her own memorial of a self-effacing aesthetic, open and complex, merging the past with the future in a committed all-embracing pledge to the present world, urging us toward a grander narrative than anyone has ever envisioned. Listening to her story in the ancient language of biblical eras is then not an act about acquiring accurate information, but a demanding visualization that transforms our fears into joy and our apprehensions into resilience. Is such a Sabbath voice present when we read our Bibles? How would we hear her in a world more alienated than ever, headed with giant leaps toward an unsustainable life?

“The reason that God refrains from further activity on the seventh day is that he has found the object of his love and has no need of any further works.” These are Karl Barth’s words about the Sabbath in his treatise on the doctrine of creation. By “resting on the seventh day, He [God] does not separate Himself from the world but binds Himself the more closely to it.” Barth defined the relationship between God and humans as the covenant of grace: “It was with man and his true humanity, as His direct and proper counterpart, that God now associated Himself in His true deity. Hence the history of the covenant was really established in the event of the seventh day,” “a covenant of grace and redemption to be fulfilled in Christ.” Barth concluded that the Sabbath commandment is the fundamental command of all of God’s commandments. It combines law and gospel; it is inclusive of all human beings, and it reminds the Sabbath observer of God as the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Barth also recognized an eschatological aspect in the Sabbath, a hidden relationship between the Sabbath and the day of the Lord.

Such correlations between Sabbath and virtually every other theological doctrine may cause a theologian’s mind to soar. But what about the postmodern who places truth in quotation marks, who considers “incredulity toward meta-narratives” the answer to everything that sounds religious? What about Generation Z digital natives who care about the environment, racial injustice, gender and sexual identity, and mental health—and tick on “nones”? How are we to tell the Sabbath story in an age of biblical illiteracy? The doctrinal enterprise surely does not have a promising future.

Which Sabbath Story Do We Tell?

A few years ago, I greatly enjoyed an award-winning film titled Life of Pi. The movie is a marvelous achievement of storytelling combined with scenes of stunning visual mastery. The protagonist is Pi Patel, an Indian Tamil boy, who explores issues of spirituality and metaphysics from an early age. After a cataclysmic shipwreck, he finds himself stranded with a ferocious Bengal tiger in a lifeboat. Together they face nature’s majestic grandeur and fury in the Pacific Ocean on an epic survival journey of two hundred and twenty-seven days. The intense preoccupation with practical matters and the problems Pi must solve form the dramatic heart of the film. How will he secure food and clean water for himself and for Richard Parker, the tiger? How will he stay sane and hopeful? How will he be able to train the tiger so as not to be devoured by him? Pi realizes that caring for the tiger also keeps himself alive.
After his eventual rescue, the insurance investigators who listen to his fantastic story are reluctant to write it up for their report. It cannot possibly be true. “Fine,” Pi says, “let me tell you a different version of what happened.” This other story also tells of the storm and everyone perishing in the ocean except for Pi, but it contains the brutal details of cannibalism committed by humans fighting for their self-preservation, and so becomes the more “believable” story. Years later, as Pi Patel relates all this to a writer, an intriguing dialogue sets the end of the film:

Pi: “So which story do you prefer?”
Writer: “The one with the tiger. That’s the better story.”
Pi: “Thank you. And, so it goes with God.”
Writer: “It’s an amazing story.”

Sabbath has no other record of origin than the Hebrew Bible. Biblical scholars and experts in the literature and history of the ancient Near East have long recognized its prestigious place in the biblical text and have produced comprehensive research in the areas of literary and comparative studies. Despite their efforts, the “believable” story of Sabbath has remained a mystery. The Sabbath is considered an unresolved item, rather ineffective for the serious scholar. Alternative explorations have opened up for a more beneficial treatment of Sabbath texts and allowed for the voice of age-old Jewish scholarship to be heard about its very own tradition. The result is a wealth of literature admiring the Sabbath’s treasures.

Among Adventists, I contend, Sabbath suffers. For a few outstanding contributions, one of them is Sigve Tonstad’s The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day. Sabbath has become a safeguarded fundamental belief. I say this with great sorrow because of the requests I have received to defend the correctness of the day, or to tell what one is not allowed to do on Sabbath. I believe that Sabbath in a confined space, inside a creedal document, within church walls, is not doing well. Sabbath is of spirit matter, “never to pass away,” “eternity in disguise,” as Abraham Joshua Heschel so insightfully writes. Freedom is its essence.

To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day . . . of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshiping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow [humans] and the forces of nature—is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for [humanity’s] progress than the Sabbath? (edited for gender neutral language). Sabbath’s avenue in the wilderness of oblivion begins at a signpost: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” (Exod 20:8). The marker signals us to stop and reminisce, to recall the story, for in the words often credited to the great Baal Shem Tov, “forgetfulness leads to exile; remembering is the key to redemption.” What is to be remembered? How does one remember? “In the realm of spirit, there is no difference between a second and a century, between an hour and an age.” And so, the skilful telling of the Sabbath story in that ancient book of Exodus is only an hour away. Yet, the challenge we face is to let its images come alive and its voices be heard in a world in much need of Spirit.

Sabbath as Memory in the Narrative of Exodus

Only those who have not ceased to be human in spite of dehumanizing conditions carry forth the vision of freedom into an enslaved world. The Hebrew Bible tells of Moses as such an individual. Right there in the midst of slavery, he sets the ground marker for Israel’s freedom trail: “Moses, why are you freeing the people? . . . You even made them rest (shabat) from their labor!” (Exod 5:4–5) is the Egyptian monarch’s bewildered question. Slaves who are free? For Pharaoh this is an incomprehensible thought. Moses knows of no limits. For him, Sabbath is divine insigné
for freedom founded in creation and reinforced in the redemptive event of the exodus (Exod 20:8–12, 31:12–17; Deut 5:12–15). To cease from work on the seventh day means to choose freedom over slavery, to master work time for the sake of divine time.

Pharaoh, on the other hand, in realizing that he has lost control over his enslaved subjects, orders an additional workload to their labor. According to Exodus 5:5, the despot is credited with using Sabbath language when he charges Moses for having authorized the Israelite slaves to “cease/stop/rest” (שַׁבָּת) from work (cf. Gen 2:2–3; Exod 16:20, 23:12). In addition, scenes of highly dramatized dialogue combine with theological overtones of human dignity and freedom within the realm of oppressive powers. Could it be that שַׁבָּת in the tyrant’s mouth is most intent in the text of Exodus 5 with the intention to carry a concept that goes far beyond mere cessation from weekly labor?

Exodus 5:1–23 portrays Yahweh and Pharaoh in sharp confrontation with each other, with the latter as a resolute opponent, an anti-God who rejects acknowledging Yahweh and his command to send off the Hebrew slaves (vv. 1–3). Pharaoh’s explosion of speeches in verses 4–5 establishes rest from labor under the control of Moses and Aaron as the root of the problem. What then follows shows the cruelty of his highly organized slave system: a sophisticated chain of command that singles out a group of slaves—the Hebrew foremen—and places them under the control of Egyptian supervisors, but then the seemingly privileged are held accountable for inevitable failure (vv. 4–19). Even worse, they become traitors and turn against their own leaders, Moses and Aaron, with vicious resentment (vv. 20–21). The biblical story has had its parallels throughout history. The atrocities of the Nazi concentration camps operating with similar efficiency will forever remain a heart-breaking demonstration of such a system.

When it comes to the historical value of Exodus 5, scholars have recognized that the text tells of the Israelites doing the same work as the laborers who are portrayed in Egyptian inscriptions and relief scenes. This involved labor relations that existed between masters and workers in terms of treatment of the workers by their taskmasters and foremen, rest days granted to the slaves, corporal punishment, etc. Thus the use of the word “cease/rest from labor” and the concept of rest for labor gangs in a biblical text reflect genuine life in ancient Egypt.

A narrative reading of Exodus 5 shows its highly dramatized style in the emotionally laden discourses of the main characters: Pharaoh, Yahweh, Moses and Aaron, the taskmasters, and the foremen. The people, however, who are the focus of the actual events, are without words and voice. The conflict is about Egypt’s methodically organized slavery system. The method, however,
that is taken to tell the drama is intricate and complex in its use of rhetoric, structure, subversive language, and unexpected words that attract attention and create meaningful ideas.23

William H. C. Propp comments on the rare harmonious situation between Israel, Moses, and Yahweh in Exodus 4:31: “The narrative rests there but for a moment.”24 Yet it is this moment that provides the setting for Moses’s audience with Pharaoh (Exod 5:1–5). Backed by a congregation willing to bow in faith and devotion to God, the leader voices Yahweh’s explicit order to send Israel off into the wilderness.25 Pharaoh’s reaction to the divine imperative is not a response; it is not an inquiry, but a provocative attack: “Who is Yahweh . . . ? I do not know Yahweh” (v. 2).26 Moses and Aaron offer more detailed information: “The God of the Hebrews has called on us. Please, let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God” (v. 3).27 Pharaoh’s open affront continues: “And the king of Egypt said to them: ‘Why, Moses and Aaron, are you freeing (tafri’u) the people from its work?’” (v. 4). Note here, the expression “king of Egypt” and not the title, “pharaoh” (par‘oh). But when the king speaks, he utters the word parah (“let free, let go out of control” / “lead, act as a leader”) in the middle of his interrogative outburst: “Why, Moses and Aaron, do you act as pharaoh in letting the people go free from work?” The pun is obvious,28 and the brusque command, “Go to your labors!” appears as if for a split second the king has recognized the ambiguity in his own words and must now demonstrate his dictatorial power.

Pharaoh then comes to the crux of the matter: “Look, many already were the people of the land! And you made them rest (hishbattem, hif ‘il form of the verb shabat) from their labors!” (v. 5). Does Pharaoh believe that a break from work is the cause for the slaves’ increase in numbers? Does he refer to a previous record in the Egyptian annals (Exod 1:9) where this matter was discussed and a draconian law issued?29 Does he recognize Moses as the survivor of the cruel pogrom of Hebrew male babies, the dissident who is now in control of the slaves calling for the ultimate stop of labor gangs?30 For Pharaoh, Moses has become a revolutionary leader calling on slaves to take a shabat rest from their labors.

In Pharaoh’s world, the call for shabat rest not only undermines his authority, but it also hinders the economy of Egypt.31 Sabbath rest within a suppressive system surely is of a subversive and obstructing nature. “You made them shabat from their labors” coming from Pharaoh’s mouth, not from Moses, stands as a powerful realization that slaves have turned into masters—not masters over others, neither over their workloads, but masters of time.

In the ears of a Hebrew audience listening to the story from Egypt, the day called shabbat resounds in Pharaoh’s words.32 Its powerful message has a follow-up in a particular Sabbath incident when a freed slave decided to turn back to slavery. The Hebrew text creates a direct connection between Exodus 5 and the story of the man who gathered wood on the Sabbath (Num 15:32–36). The link exists because of the verb “gather” (qashash), which occurs only four times in the Pentateuch: twice when describing the toil and oppression of the Israelites in Egypt (Exod 5:7, 12) and twice when narrating the offensive behavior of the wood-gatherer (Num 15:32, 33).33 The telling link draws a connection between the slaves who were forced to “gather” (qashash) straw with no rest (shabat) and the man who defiantly went out and “gathered” (qashash) wood on the day of Sabbath rest (shabbat) and so placed himself back into the position of a slave.34

Furthermore, Pharaoh’s building program is all about that which is transient, fleeting, and without any stable and enduring substance. Brick making is the main work in Egypt (Exod 5:7, 8, 14, 16, 18, 19; cf. 1:14) to build cities (Exod 1:11), just as it was in the land of Shinar (Gen 11:2) when the people began to build the city and tower of Babel (Gen 11:3, 4, 5, 8). While the tower builders were eager to produce bricks of high quality by burning them thoroughly (v. 3), Pharaoh’s bricks are made with straw, which, yes, is to provide strength and consistency,35 but in the biblical narrative has the metaphorical connotation of frailness and transitoriness (Job 21:18,
Stubble is blown away by the wind (Isa 40:24; Isa 47:14; Joel 2:5; Obad 18; Mal 4:1). Exodus 5 and the Babel story in Genesis 11 use the verb “scatter, disperse” (putz). The Hebrew slaves “scattered over all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw” (Exod 5:12). The results were a failed productivity quota, punishment, distress, and resentment against their own leaders (vv. 13–19). In the case of the tower builders, they were concerned with being “scattered over the surface of the whole land” (Gen 11:4) and, for that reason, they began to build a city and tower with its top in the heavens. But then Yahweh “scattered them over the surface of the whole land” (vv. 8, 9), which brought to a halt the entire building project.

I do not hold that shabat rest in Exodus 5 corroborates an established weekly Sabbath institution of the Israelites in Egypt. For, when the liberated slaves gather manna for six days in the wilderness and do not find any on the seventh day, they still have to become familiar with the Sabbath’s rhythmic and weekly recurrence (Exod 16). On the other hand, Exodus 16 does not depict Sabbath as something completely new. Sabbath rest in Exodus 5 is about the essential, the destabilizing of an autocratic power system. Its story is told by voiceless slaves building cities that are destined for ruin. While they are overflowing the land under the scorching Egyptian sun to fetch stubble that is blown away by the wind, the old story stirs up visions of a transient empire. The oppressor’s word about shabat portrays him as a defeated tyrant even within his own powerful and still-functioning regime. This is the moment when Sabbath rest begins to disclose its transcendent and permanent quality: to master time is to be truly free.

Sabbath as Memory in the Laws of Exodus 23
To do what God asks for is “an act of communion with Him” as he becomes “a partner to our deeds.” In the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 23:12, God’s involvement in human affairs is a matter of “depth theology,” of laying bare the true situation of the human being in order to act on belief, and not to enhance the body of doctrines and parochial institutions.

Exodus 23:12 reads: “Six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease [shabat] for the sake of your ox and your donkey that they may rest, and the son of your slave woman be refreshed, as well as the stranger” (my own translation).

The rarely used verb “breathe, refresh” (nafash) in the Hebrew Bible sets this Sabbath commandment apart from the Decalogue versions in Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15. When this verb occurs again in the Hebrew Bible (Exod 31:17; 2 Sam 16:14), it designates the catching of one’s breath during a time of pause. In 2 Samuel 16:14, the verb speaks of King David and his people recovering from fatigue during their flight from Absalom. In Exodus 31:17, God is described as being refreshed after the work of creation. Scholars suggest that the anthropomorphic language employed for God’s refreshment on the seventh day is used as an example for human Sabbath rest and refreshment.

The context of Exodus 23:12 provides a particular aspect to understanding the verb “breathe, refresh” in relation to the Sabbath. Only three verses above we read, “You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings [nefesh] of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exod 23:9, New American Standard Bible). The verb nafash relates to the cognate noun nefesh, which, though often translated as “soul,” regards the whole life of a person. The resonance between the verb and the noun highlights the experience of the Israelite Sabbath keeper who has been a stranger in Egypt and knows of weariness and depletion and, therefore, s/he will give opportunity for the slave and the stranger to breathe.

Furthermore, Exodus 23:12 defines who is to catch a breath when the Israelite Sabbath keeper rests, namely “the son of your slave woman.” The two prominent versions of the Decalogue mention only the slave woman (’amah; Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14), but not her son (ben ’amah). A close intertextual study on the divergence between the Sabbath commandments recognizes Exodus 23:12 as a unique law with a narrative in its
background that gives voice to a slave woman who was cast off because of her son. According to Genesis 21, Hagar, the ‘amah in Abraham and Sarah’s household, has become useless and has been pushed out with her son, for Isaac, the rightful heir, has come. The “son of the slave woman” (Gen 21:10, 13), on the other hand, is not mentioned by name. Out in the wilderness “God heard the voice of the boy” (Gen 21:17). Whereas we have become acquainted with Hagar’s cry from a previous story (Gen 16:11) and may think that God approves of the treatment she received from her owners, God of Sabbath does not (Exod 22:21–24). For the attentive Hebrew speaker, the punch word comes at the very end of Exodus 23:12: “the stranger.” Whereas Exodus 20:11 and Deuteronomy 5:14 speak of “your stranger” (ger-cha) as one who should not work on Sabbath, Exodus 23:12 has “the stranger” (ha-ger) (my emphasis). By eliminating the pronoun “your” and placing the definite article ha before the noun ger, Hagar’s story with her dying son instantly burns itself into the audience’s consciousness of the Sabbath. Hagar (ha-ger, the stranger) is not a name to be identified with. The tragedy in Abraham and Sarah’s house was that the Egyptian slave woman never heard herself called by name; she was and remained “the stranger” (ha-ger).

The context of Exodus 23:12 has diligently prepared and sensitized the Hebrew audience to recognize the pun: “You shall not wrong a stranger [ger] or oppress him, for you were strangers [gerim] in the land of Egypt” (Exod 22:20 [20:21]). Also, “You shall not oppress a stranger [ger], since you yourselves know the feelings of the stranger [ha-ger], for you also were strangers [gerim] in the land of Egypt” (Exod 23:9, New American Standard Bible). A few verses further into the context of Exodus 23:12, the law code calls for compassionate concern toward the oppressed, whose social and legal status make them potential victims of injustice: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, and the slave. The law provides an analogue to God’s empathetic listening to the people’s cries during their sufferings in Egypt (Exod 22:21–27, 23:6–11). The cry and compassion motif is fundamental to the entire book of Exodus, functioning similar to a trigger device: “The Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry” (Exod 3:7). Sabbath disrupts the patriarchal, dehumanizing power structures in this world. Sabbath urges the redeemed to receive the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee, the discarded as their own. In so doing, the Sabbath keeper will bring release to the captives and good news and regeneration to the afflicted mother and her child (Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18).

Tonstad introduced his monograph on the Sabbath with the words, “The seventh day is like a jar buried deep in the sands of time, preserving a treasure long lost and forgotten.” That jar holds some of the most amazing mysteries needing to be rediscovered. Hagar, the stranger, has grown into many, coming to our borders, depleted, weeping, and calling for help; her child’s silent cries—who will hear them? Sabbath thrives among people in desperate need of a vision, a dream of a different world, people who feel the strikes and the beatings and whose souls are frightened. Sabbath invites all to enter and sit at the table together. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel spoke of such a world: “I believe in wounded faith. Only a wounded faith can exist after those events.”

I still remember the eight-year-old. She has
accompanies me across the continents, from Europe to North America to Asia and back to North America. She waited as I researched the books for Sabbath. She is still nearby, reminding me of Sabbath’s story when faith began inside wounded palms in that classroom in a small town in Romania.

ENDNOTES:

1. This address was previously published in Spez Christiana 32, vol. 2 (2021): 7-22.

2. The feminine pronoun is in reference to the Talmud, speaking of the Sabbath as queen and bride, Shabbath 119a. “Rabbi Hanina would wrap himself in his garment and stand at nightfall on Shabbat eve, and say: Come and we will go out to greet Shabbat the queen. Rabbi Yannai put on his garment on Shabbat eve and said: Enter, O bride. Enter, O bride.”

3. While this quote is often attributed to Winston Churchill, its origin is unknown.


5. Barth, Church Dogmatics, III-1, 223.

6. Barth, Church Dogmatics, III-1, 217.


8. Barth, Church Dogmatics, III-4, 53-55.


26. Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus.” The word “to know” Yahweh is a powerful Leitmotiv in the exodus narration (Exod 6:3, 7-5, 7-17, 8-6, 18, 9:14, 29, 10:2, 14-4, 18).

27. Later in the narrative, this clause will become a standard mocking by Pharaoh and the reason for calling the people “shirkers” or “weaklings” (vv 8, 17).

28. Propp, Exodus 1-18, 253. Martin Luther also recognized Sabbath rest in the expression and rendered it by the word feria (celebrate) in the German translation of the Bible (Revidierte Fassung von 1894).

29. This is often understood as explaining the economic reasons for refusing to let the people go. Nahum M. Sarna, Exodus, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 26. “The sons of Israel” (Exod 1:9) are replaced with “the people of the land” (Exod 5:1), which possibly draws a change in perspective regarding the status of the Israelites in Egypt over the course of their time of slavery. It could imply that “the sons of Israel” had been integrated as slaves and had become in Pharaoh’s eyes “the people of the land” (Exod 5:2) who are now regarded as Egyptians. See Propp, Exodus 1-18, 254.

30. Houtman interprets Pharaoh’s words in the sense that “Moses and Aaron are troublemakers who incite the people to shirk their duty and stop working.” Cornelius Houtman, Exodus 1, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, trans. Johan Rebel and Siedd Woudstra (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok Publishing House, 1993), 456.

31. Benno Jacob understands Pharaoh’s hisbammim as referring to a holiday from hard work either in the sense of the Sabbath (Exod 16) or the Passover feast (Exod 12:14), the only holidays before Israel arrived at Mount Sinai. Jacob, The Second Book of the Bible, Exodus, 131.


33. Outside the Pentateuch the verb occurs in 1 Kgs 17:10, 12 and Zeph 2:1.


35. See Nims, “Bricks without Straw?” Propp, Exodus 1-18, 255.


39. All significant characteristics of the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 23:12 and its context are included in this Psalm: the theological motif of God’s compassionate love is shown clearly in the cry of the one who is about to die, as well as the theology of the Sabbath commandment—“rest,” “soul,” and “son of your maid servant.”


41. See Hans Walter Wolf, Anthropology of the Old Testament, trans. Margaret Kühl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 139. “These are people who are particularly without redress against any orders given to them. Though a master might not dare to exact work on the sabbath from his adult woman slave, he was much more easily able to exert pressure on her son, or on the foreign worker, who was all too easily viewed as being outside the sphere of liberty set by Yahweh’s commandment. This version of the Sabbath commandment therefore picks up the borderline case: the sabbath has been instituted for the sake of all those who are especially hard-driven and especially dependent.”

42. Tonstad, The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day, 2.

We had just completed a delightful tour of six ancient cities of the Decapolis and were settling into our hotel in Madaba, Jordan. Our highly anticipated archaeological dig would begin in a couple days. But something was wrong. I didn’t feel quite right.

Someone found a test kit. After twirling the foam-tipped applicator deep inside both nostrils, I inserted the tip into the slot at the base of the moistened test strip, and waited fifteen minutes.

Alas, the dreaded second line appeared. Despite all the vaccinations and masking, I’d caught COVID. After losing my appetite, I then endured a succession of aches, fever, chills, sweats, and coughs.

Mercifully, after a week of quarantined isolation and discomfort, I and three other members of our group who had tested positive were back on task. Trowel in hand, I began my dig into Tel Hesbon’s history. Thanks to antivirals, I was one of the fortunate ones.

Did God Create Viruses?

Since December 2019, around 772 million individuals—nearly one in every ten humans on the planet—have contracted COVID-19. Some seven million of those infected have died.\(^1\) Many survivors live with “long COVID” and experience such symptoms as shortness of breath, chest pain, headache, dizziness, depression, stomach pain, rash, and joint or muscle pain.\(^2\) In addition to the human death and misery, the pandemic drained trillions of dollars from the world’s economy in the largest economic downturn since the Great Depression.\(^3\)

The COVID-19 pandemic is only the most recent viral disaster to plague humans. The Spanish flu, polio, Asian flu, SARS, swine flu, MERS, Ebola, Zika, and other devastating diseases have taken a massive toll during the past century or so. Viral plagues remain a constant threat and will continue to afflict humankind in the future. And less deadly viruses inflict intermittent, thankfully temporary, miseries upon us—the common cold, influenza, food poisoning, and the like.

Welcome to the world of viruses. Here I will provide a brief overview of this strange, all-encompassing, fast-evolving world. I will explain both the negative and positive (yes!) impact of viruses on human and environmental health. And finally, I will address the question: Did God create viruses?

But first we need to understand what viruses are and how they work.

**What Are Viruses?**

Back in 1977, Sir Peter Medawar famously defined a virus as “a piece of bad news wrapped in a protein.”\(^4\) But we now know that for humans, his colorful definition applies only to a tiny fraction of those microbes. Out of hundreds of thousands of types of viruses, only two hundred and nineteen are known to cause human illness.\(^5\) Most viruses are either harmless or beneficial to humans.\(^6\)

Viruses are intracellular parasites. They inject their nucleic acid (DNA or RNA) directly into living cells. The protein capsule that initially enclosed the nucleic acid remains outside the cell like a spent syringe. Inside, the nucleic acid forces the cell machinery to make more copies of the virus.\(^7\)

Viruses are tiny. Most have diameters of only twenty to four hundred nanometers. (One millimeter, or about 0.0394 inches, equals one million nanometers.) To put this in perspective, the COVID-19 virus is approximately one hundred nanometers in diameter; thus 10,000 COVID-19 virions (virus particles) could fit side-to-side within a space of one millimeter.\(^8\) Because they are so small, viruses could not be visualized until the invention of electron microscopes in the 1930s. Before that time, scientists could only infer their existence.\(^9\)

Viruses occur in and on the bodies of all fungi, plants, and animals, including humans. As an adult human male, I have approximately 36 trillion human cells.\(^10\) But I also contain some 39 trillion bacterial cells,\(^11\) unnumbered fungi and archaea, and perhaps as many as 380 trillion virions.\(^12\) It would be the height of hubris to call myself an individual—I’m a microbe-dominated ecosystem!

Viruses lurk everywhere. One milliliter (about one-fifth teaspoon) of ocean water has up to 250 million virus particles;\(^13\) one gram (about one-third ounce) of fertile soil contains up to 5.8 billion virus particles;\(^14\) and one cubic meter (about one and one-third cubic yards) of indoor air possesses around 470 thousand virus particles. Every day we breathe in approximately six million virus particles.\(^15\) Not only do we contain
viral multitudes, but we live and move within a viral blizzard.

Because viruses are so abundant and immersive with living things, scientists suspect they have shaped broad aspects of life from its very beginning.

**Are Viruses Alive?**

For many years I taught general biology, a university-level course that introduces first-year science majors to the main features of living things. During the initial lecture I always raised the question, “What defines something as living?” I then described the characteristics shared by all living things: growth, metabolism, responsiveness to stimuli, reproduction, and adaptation of populations to changing circumstances.

How well do viruses fit within this definition? Not well. Viruses cannot grow, cannot metabolize, and cannot respond to stimuli. They can reproduce, but only with the help of the host cells they invade. Like the organisms they infect, however, viruses are champions at adapting to changing environments, never giving vaccine designers a rest. Based on this one characteristic, should we call them alive?

In the year 2000, the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses officially declared, “Viruses are not living organisms.” Advances in knowledge, however, often falsify our simplistic attempts at categorization. The recent discovery of “giant viruses” (see below), which exhibit cell-like features, is now calling into question the committee’s declaration, and today scientists are increasingly considering viruses to be living.\(^{16}\)

I remain on the conservative side of the question and simply say that viruses exist between the world of the living and the non-living. Thus, I prefer to define viruses as complexes of large biological molecules.

**How Were Viruses Discovered?**

Around 1890, Dmitri Ivanovsky, a Russian microbiologist, began the task of identifying a disease that affected the leaves of tobacco plants grown in Ukraine and Crimea. Ivanovsky passed fluid from the leaves and stems through a fine, porcelain filter to exclude any bacteria but soon discovered that the filtered fluid remained infective when smeared on the plants. He decided the infective agent must be a tiny bacterium.\(^{17}\)

In 1898, the Dutch microbiologist Martinus Beijerinck confronted the same problem—diseased tobacco plants. Like Ivanovsky, Beijerinck forced fluid from the plants through a fine filter to exclude bacteria. And like Ivanovsky he found that the filtered fluid remained infective. Unlike Ivanovsky, however, Beijerinck was able to rule out the presence of bacteria, even tiny ones. He did not know the nature of the infective agent, but he called it a “virus,” a word from Latin meaning “poison.” Unwittingly, he and Ivanovsky had discovered the tobacco-mosaic virus, which today continues to serve as a research workhorse in virology labs.\(^{18}\)

As mentioned above, viruses were too small for Ivanovsky and Beijerinck to observe using the light microscope, which at the time was the best magnifying instrument available. It wasn’t until the German physicist Ernst Ruska invented the electron microscope that viruses could be visualized. In about 1938, Ruska’s
brother, the physician Helmut Ruska, made the first images of viruses using his brother’s invention. Now viruses could be seen and not just inferred.\textsuperscript{19}

**How Diverse Are Viruses?**

In the past several decades, researchers have identified hundreds of thousands of kinds of viruses through a technique called metagenomic analysis.\textsuperscript{20} In this process, an environmental sample of, say, soil, seawater, or feces is collected and filtered to eliminate everything except cells and viruses. All the DNA molecules are removed from the sample and sequenced (meaning the order of the A, T, G, C bases that constitutes the genetic code). Viral DNA can be identified because it contains unique coding sequences that distinguish it from other sources.\textsuperscript{21}

Metagenomics is a powerful technique. A single paper published in 2019, for example, reported the discovery of 195,728 new marine viruses from 145 marine sampling sites.\textsuperscript{22} Science discovers new viruses every day.

Viruses exhibit many shapes. Some, like the Ebola virus, are long and thin. Others, called bacteriophages, look like tiny lunar landers. Still others, such as the common cold virus, are spherically shaped and covered with spike-like processes. In addition, viruses exhibit a large size variation. As already noted, most range between twenty and four hundred nanometers in diameter. But some of the so-called “giant viruses” are larger than bacterial cells and can be viewed using a simple light microscope.\textsuperscript{23}

The genetic material of viruses also differs. Some viruses, like most cells, contain double-stranded DNA. But others have single-stranded DNA, double-stranded RNA, or single-stranded RNA. Moreover, the strands can be positive (coding) strands, or they can be negative (non-coding) strands. Without going into detail, different types of strands use somewhat different routes to direct the formation of viral proteins and genetic material.\textsuperscript{24}

**What Are Giant Viruses and Bacteriophages?**

Given their theoretical and numerical significance, I will briefly highlight two interesting groups of viruses. Giant viruses were first isolated in 1992 from a hospital cooling tower in Bradford, England,\textsuperscript{25} but they were not characterized until 2003.\textsuperscript{26} More than one hundred types of giant viruses have now been discovered in everything from sewage ponds to Amazon River water and forest soils. Aside from their large size, which distinguishes them from other viruses, some giant viruses contain more than one thousand genes (compared, for example, to just twelve functional genes in the COVID-19 virus), including genes that code for enzymes that control glycolysis, Krebs cycle, fermentation, and cytoskeleton formation—cellular enzymes.\textsuperscript{27} Even more bizarre is the fact that giant viruses, like cells, are sometimes parasitized by smaller viruses called “virophages”—parasites within parasites.\textsuperscript{28} The cell-like features of giant viruses have caused some biologists to suggest that they are either simple cells that lost some of the functions of ordinary cells, or that they originated from the combination of genes from smaller viruses via a process called “horizontal transfer.”\textsuperscript{29}

The second group of viruses I’ll highlight are the bacteriophages, or simply “phages.” They are by far the most numerous of all. As the name suggests, bacteriophages parasitize bacteria which also are very abundant. Most bacteriophages consist of a protein capsule shaped as an \(x\) (a twenty-sided polyhedron), a protein tail beneath the capsule, and tail fibers. The phage DNA is wound tightly inside the capsule. Once a phage attaches itself to a bacterium, the phage tail injects DNA from the capsule into the cell, functioning very much like a hypodermic needle. Once inside, the phage DNA converts the bacterial cell into a bacteriophage factory, churning out scores of new phages.\textsuperscript{30} I have more to say about bacteriophages below.

**How Do Viruses Reproduce?**

Broadly speaking, viruses reproduce in two ways. The first involves the lytic cycle. In this process, the virus injects its nucleic acid (DNA or RNA) into the host cell. Once inside, the viral nucleic acid causes host organelles and enzymes to produce more viral proteins, some of which cut up the host’s DNA, and more viral nucleic acids from host molecules. The proteins self-assemble
via molecular attraction into new viral capsules and other structures, which then enclose new strands of viral nucleic acids. The newly assembled viral particles exit the cell, often in large numbers, lysing (breaking apart) the host cell in the process. The new viral particles find other host cells to infect, repeating the lytic cycle. The process is remarkably complex and involves a battery of interacting molecules.31

The second form of reproduction involves the lysogenic cycle. In it, the virus injects its DNA or RNA just as in the lytic cycle. But once inside the cell, instead of forcing the cell to make more viral particles, the viral DNA (or RNA translated into DNA) inserts itself into the DNA of the host cell. There it may reside for a long time—even permanently, as in the case of “HERVs” that I mention below. When the cell divides, the viral DNA gets replicated along with the host DNA and passed along to the daughter cells. Under certain conditions, the viral DNA may excise itself from the cellular genome and enter the lytic cycle.32

As should be obvious at this point, there is nothing simple about the biology of viruses.

**How Are Viruses Transmitted?**

Viruses move from host to host in a couple ways. During horizontal transmission, the virus passes from one organism to another through the air, as with the virus that causes the common cold; or through water, as with the virus that causes cholera; or through direct contact or bodily fluids, as with the AIDS virus. Horizontal transmission can occur both within and between species. Often, human pandemics occur when a virus that has long resided in a wild animal population mutates and becomes capable of infecting humans (a “zoonotic” disease). Once it enters the human population, the virus spreads from human to human. It is what happened with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which originated within African non-human primates, and what may have occurred with the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19.33

The second mode of transmission is called vertical transmission. Vertical transmission occurs when a virus goes from parent to offspring through the blood, milk, or other bodily fluid. HIV/AIDS, rubella, Zika, and herpes viruses can all get passed along in this way.34

**What Viruses Are Beneficial for Humans?**

Earlier, I noted that most viruses are harmless to humans, and that some viruses are even beneficial. That comes as a surprise to many people—the term “virus” connotes “disease” for most people.

Some years ago, I attended a seminar by a virologist. I asked if she knew of any beneficial viruses. She thought for a moment and said, no, she didn’t know of any beneficial viruses. Her response depicted the general belief of people over the course of many years. Recent
discoveries, however, have changed the perspective.

Had I not put our speaker on the spot, she might have recalled that some bacteriophages can destroy bacterial pathogens like *Shigella* and *Staphylococcus*. In Russia and Georgia, a person with a bacterial infection can walk into a clinic or pharmacy and receive treatment in the form of a phage solution taken orally or applied topically. The treatment often works and has saved many lives since first tried in 1919. The West has long considered “phage therapy” suspect, in part because of its development in a Stalinist nation. But now that antibiotic resistance has become such a serious problem, phage therapy will likely become more widespread. Many companies in Western Europe and North America are now exploring ways to use phages to treat bacterial infections.

In addition, we now recognize that the billions of bacteriophages in our digestive tract keep the helpful populations of bacteria there in balance, bacteria that help digest cellulose, manufacture vitamin K, bolster the immune system, and outcompete harmful bacteria, among other functions. In short, we would not live long without the positive contributions that both bacteria and phages make within our digestive tract.

Yet another vital role that viral DNA plays in our bodies occurs in the form of human endogenous retroviruses, or HERVs for short. Geneticists estimate that eight percent of our DNA consists of HERVs incorporated long ago by the process of lysogeny. Some HERVs are no longer of any functional significance, and many others cause problems such as cancer. But others are necessary for our very existence. One of them, for example, is responsible for producing syncytin, a protein crucial for the development of the placenta during pregnancy. Another directs the production of amylase, which breaks down starch molecules in our digestive tract. And then an entire series of HERVs directs the production of globin, a primary constituent of hemoglobin and myoglobin, crucially important oxygen carrying and storage molecules.

The upshot of all this is that while some viruses are harmful to humans, others protect us from disease, provide important anatomical structures, and produce enzymes for digestion, oxygen transport, immune responses, and additional crucial activities.

**What Other “Good” Viruses Are There?**

Here I use the term “good” to refer to situations in which the virus makes life better, or even possible, for organisms.

Consider, for example, the virus that infects a fungus which, in turn, infects panic grass, a plant that lives along the borders of thermal ponds in Yellowstone National Park. The soils along the edges of such ponds reach 55⁰ Celsius (131⁰ Fahrenheit), temperatures that would kill most plants. But panic grass survives because of its symbiotic relationship with its virus-infected fungus. Take away the fungus or the virus, and the grass will die.

Then consider white clover cryptic virus. White clover, a member of the legume family, is known for its ability to remove free nitrogen from the air and combine it with oxygen to make nitrate. The nitrate serves as a nutrient—the clover’s self-made fertilizer. The process of “nitrogen fixation” occurs within bacteria-containing nodules that form along the clover roots. The development of nodules requires energy. If the virus infects a clover plant and the soil contains sufficient nitrogen, the virus suppresses the formation of nodules in the plant’s roots. Insufficient nitrogen, however, removes the suppression, and the plant produces nodules. The virus thus benefits the plant by controlling whether or not it produces nodules, maximizing use of the plant’s available energy.

My final and favorite example involves the large concentration of viruses in seawater, many of which are bacteriophages. Photosynthetic bacteria called cyanobacteria are also abundant in seawater, and photosynthesis releases oxygen as a byproduct. Curiously, infection of cyanobacteria cells by bacteriophages increases their photosynthetic rate, thus producing more oxygen. It’s been estimated that eight percent of the oxygen in the atmosphere comes from this “turbo-boost” to marine cyanobacteria. Such oxygen is what we and all other aerobic, terrestrial organisms on earth depend on.
Many other examples of beneficial viruses could be listed. As we become better acquainted with the virosphere, science will discover more and more examples. Viruses, it turns out, are crucial for the existence of life on earth.

**Where Do Scientists Think Viruses Came From?**

Nobody knows the origin of viruses. But that hasn’t kept scientists from posing hypotheses.

The “virus-first” hypothesis was an early explanation given for the possible origin of viruses. According to this view, viruses emerged from a pre-cellular, primordial soup of amino acids, lipids, and RNA—RNA because this nucleic acid can function as its own enzyme, and enzymes are required for nucleic acids to form viral proteins. The virus-first hypothesis is no longer popular because, in part, it seems unlikely that a virus could arise before host cells were available.44

The “escape” hypothesis suggests that genes developed the capacity to leave and exist outside of cells. As they exited the cells, pieces of cell membrane enclosed them. Such membrane-encapsulated genes became the first viruses. This hypothesis carries a certain degree of plausibility, because so-called “jumping genes” do sometimes excise themselves out of cellular chromosomes. Moreover, some viruses called “envelope viruses” are enclosed in membrane-like structures.45

Finally, the “reduction” hypothesis assumes that single-celled organisms lost important functions such as metabolism and self-replication. They then became parasites on fully functioning host cells, as do viruses today. This hypothesis has gained adherents in recent years because of the discovery of giant viruses. Giant viruses, as we’ve seen, are not only as large as some cells, but they contain large numbers of genes used for many types of cellular processes.46

As we learn more about viruses, scientific views about their origins will be continually refined and modified.

**Did God Create Viruses?**

A very big question, it is one that raises other very big questions, such as: What is God like? When did God create? What did God create? How did God create? Christians believe that God is the Creator but, despite claims by some to the contrary, we do not know what, when, or how God created. Both the origins of life and the God of origins are shrouded in mystery.

God’s creation has experienced many changes over time. Some of them have led to predation, cannibalism, and parasitism. But other examples have resulted in astounding species diversity, dazzling beauty—and an amazingly complex virosphere.

People of faith believe that God is good, that what God makes is good, and that God is maker of all.47 But reality suggests that nature at its very core is a mixture of things we like and things we don’t like—a combination of “good” and “evil.” The existence of both beneficial and harmful viruses is a poignant example of this reality. The question for each of us, then, is: How do we resolve this tension with integrity and within the context of commitment to faith in a Creator God?
and within the context of commitment to faith in a Creator God?

As it turns out, Christians voice a variety of perspectives on the origin and existence of viruses. Some commentators, like Joshua Moritz, a lecturer in philosophical theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, view viruses as originating from mysterious dark forces. “Like evil and demonic in the Bible,” he writes, “viruses are a form of intelligent non-life that seeks to distort information and truth in order to illegitimately enter in through a host’s gates in order to steal and destroy health and life.” Erwin Lutzer, former pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, holds that God uses the COVID-19 virus to teach us a lesson. He sees the COVID-19 virus as “God’s judgment” for sins such as divorce and abortion. He believes that viruses and other “judgments . . . come to us from God, not because God does them but . . . [w]e have to learn from what he has allowed.”

By contrast, Daniel Harrell, former editor-in-chief of Christianity Today, takes an alternate view. “Unless God’s creation defies every characteristic of biological reality,” he writes, “bacteria and viruses are not bitter fruits of the fall, but among the first fruits of good creation itself. If science is right, there could be no life as we know it without [viruses]. God makes no mistakes . . . and viruses indeed are mirabilis [miraculous] . . . and part of the plan from the start.” Harrell’s perspective is consistent with the findings of science and the views of Christian theologians and philosophers who hold that God is a God of freedom, a Creator who has given the creation space to freely choose among multiple paths.

I favor Harrell’s view because wherever I look in the universe, I see process and the unfolding of new reality—galaxies collide, and new stars form; tectonic plates merge, and new volcanoes erupt; mountains rise, and new species emerge; humans conceive, and new babies are born; viruses mutate, and new hosts get infected. In this view, the God of creation is a God of process, one who not only creates but also allows created things the freedom to make “choices” and participate in the creative process. Some choices lead to “good” outcomes, and others to results that we judge as “natural evil.”

Alvin Plantinga, a philosopher at the University of Notre Dame, notes: “A world containing creatures who are significantly free . . . is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can’t cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so then they aren’t significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely” (italics his). Similarly, Terence Fretheim, an Old Testament scholar at Luther Seminary, states that “God does not create with strings attached or keep creatures on a leash.” Fretheim notes that most students of Genesis 1 “agree that such natural events as earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, destructive weather patterns, cell mutations, and even potentially deadly viruses were an integral part” of the original creation, and that “in some sense, such natural events are God-designed in the very creation of things, and they can be destructive.”

For those of us who grew up with the notion of a “perfect” creation, an open view of God and creation sounds foreign, if not heretical. I must admit the concept is not completely satisfying to me, but it is an honest attempt to take seriously both the scientific evidence and a sincere faith in the Creator God. The more deeply I delve into the details of the universe—the integrated and indelible processes of galactic, geologic, organismal, and viral systems that lead to both misery and grandeur—the more this interpretation seems to be the most reasonable of available options.

So, did God create viruses? In view of their remarkable diversity, their amazing capabilities, and the crucial functions they carry out for us and for all living things, I would have to say, yes. And as to why some viruses cause so much death and destruction, I would suggest that at times these complex molecular machines follow available pathways that are detrimental to life, nudged along through time by the omnipresent forces of mutation, horizontal gene transfer, natural selection, and other organic processes.

Whatever approach we take regarding the origin and existence of viruses, one thing is clear: we are just
beginning to understand the diverse roles that they play in our lives and those of all living things. The wonders of the virosphere are opening before us at an ever-increasing pace. A rapidly growing awareness that both our bodies and the world around us are completely integrated with these microbes is revolutionizing our perception of ourselves, of the biosphere, and of creation itself.

ENDNOTES:
30. Lal, Invisible Empire, 44.
34. Ireland, The Good Virus, 9.
35. Ireland, The Good Virus, 93–98, 100.
36. Ireland, The Good Virus, 21, 324.
44. Lal, Invisible Empire, 248–249.
46. Lal, Invisible Empire, 36.
Thinking Philosophy and Theology Together

“Though philosophy is not theology, and though theology can never wisely identify itself in any exclusive sense with any one philosophy, it is in the very nature of things that each should react upon the other. There is no question as to the close connexions [sic] and interactions which have existed in past history between philosophy and theology, and we may anticipate that such interactions—perhaps in the future as in the past not without friction—will recur.” – John Martin Creed

I. Introduction
Theology and philosophy overlap significantly. This is true although their subject matters differ in part. And it is true despite the fact that, while philosophy need not do so, theology seeks to be self-conscious regarding its rootedness in the Christian tradition and understands itself as contributing to Christian existence. Theology can learn from and might even elaborate...
Christian beliefs using the concepts and vocabulary of any of several systematic accounts of reality. (Indeed, it can appeal to some philosophical systems precisely because of their consonance with Christian belief.) But it need not do so; it need not be philosophical in this sense. It cannot, however, avoid attending to its own internal coherence, nor can it ignore its own need for internal consistency and for comprehensive responsiveness to all of our knowledge and experience (though it is not, of course, dependent on purportedly neutral beliefs or experiences, but can and should seek to place what we know and undergo within the Christian narrative). It must, then, attend to clarity, consistency, and comprehensiveness; it must aspire to at least some measure of analytical rigor. So there is a sense in which it cannot but be philosophical.

In what follows, I seek to spell out my understanding of the activities of theology and philosophy (Part II) before attempting to show that they are distinguishable but substantially overlapping (Part III). I conclude (Part IV) with a recap.

II. Defining Terms
A. Introduction
I begin by spelling out in Part II how I understand the activities of theology (Section B) and philosophy (Section C). I am, of course, not claiming that my choices to use words in particular ways track any Platonic forms, that they are in any sense necessary; I am only explaining how I will use my key terms to avoid later confusion.

B. Christian Theology
By Christian theology, I understand a critical, reflective activity concerned with the content, adequacy, and implications of Christian beliefs that is conducted self-consciously within the Christian tradition and in support of Christian existence. This activity can take the form of a descriptive, interpretive exercise in intellectual and cultural history, in which the theologian seeks to offer an accurate, contextual interpretation designed to show what others have in fact believed; in this case, we can speak broadly of historical theology or more narrowly of, say, patristic or biblical theology. It can also take the form of an analytically informed exercise in synthesis and construction, in which the theologian seeks to show what makes sense for Christians to believe about a particular topic, to display a particular pattern of interconnection among Christian beliefs, or both. Here, we might speak of constructive theology (as well as, in different settings, of doctrinal, systematic, or, depending on the theologian’s object of inquiry, moral or pastoral theology). It is this kind of theology that is my focus here.

When I say that Christian theology is carried on self-consciously within the Christian tradition, broadly construed, I do not mean at all that non-Christian insights are irrelevant to theology or that theologians should not draw on the work of or engage with...
Thinkers who are not seeking to help Christians think better as Christians can certainly be concerned with the same questions as Christian theologians, and the Christian community can learn from such thinkers. But I think they would agree that they themselves are not doing Christian theology. When Richard Dawkins offers arguments intended to show that belief in God is nonsensical or when Christopher Hitchens seeks to show that it yields morally problematic consequences, they are certainly addressing the contents of Christian belief, but I think it would be idiosyncratic to say that either therefore is doing Christian theology.

How we delimit the range of topics with which theology is concerned, whether we treat a given topic as an object of Christian belief, is to some degree a matter of taste and preference. The topics of Christian belief include those addressed in the Apostles’, Nicene, and Chalcedonian creeds, and other issues interestingly related to these. In principle, anything related to those central topics that exhibits the potential to influence personal or ecclesial practice or self-understanding should qualify. (It should always be possible to spell out the significance of a theological argument for Christian existence, whether or not the argument otherwise makes any overt reference to it.)

Theology as a whole is carried on within the Christian tradition. It assumes the general aptness of that tradition and will in many cases contribute to its development. That does not mean that it is tightly controlled by the views of earlier Christian thinkers, even those whose views are generally accepted. If theology were controlled by the views of past thinkers, the corpus of Christian belief and practice and the array of available Christian intellectual resources could never grow responsibly.

Theology may seek to adjust elements of the tradition because traditions are growing, developing realities, and theology is a crucial source of the Christian tradition’s growth. It may also seek to enhance the tradition by addressing topics or elaborating arguments that have not previously figured in the tradition. And it may explore ideas or employ arguments that are intended to serve Christian life and that are consistent with the tradition but that are not necessarily intended to become incorporated in it. This might be because they are too narrow or technical. It might also be because they involve ways of spelling out the meaning of aspects of Christian belief that might be treated by their exponents as options worth considering but as too uncertainly grounded to be regarded with great confidence and therefore proposed for incorporation into the tradition.

Theology may concern not only general, non-empirical questions regarding the structure of reality and similar topics that rightly occupy philosophers, but also particular factual questions. Most importantly for Christians will be those concerning the life,
ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Ones concerning empirical regularities will be of theological significance, too. The empirical regularities might themselves be the foci of doctrinal claims. (Belief that a bent toward wrongdoing is a predictable feature of humanness is the obvious example here, as is belief that the physical world is ordered by laws of nature reflective of the divine goal that there be increasing complexity, beauty, and conscious action and appreciation through creation.)

Empirical regularities that are not themselves elements of the contents of particular Christian beliefs might also be theologically relevant because they are directly relevant to such beliefs. For instance, empirical regularities about human social interaction will likely prove relevant to a plausible contemporary appropriation of the Decalogue’s prohibition on theft. Similarly, facts about the dispositions and capacities of women and men will be very relevant to claims about the roles of female and male participants in church life—facts ascertained using the best available biological, psychological, and sociological investigative techniques.

C. Philosophy

By philosophy, I understand a critical, reflective activity concerned with basic aspects of existence, human and otherwise, that are not as such contingent matters of fact amenable to empirical inquiry. I am not attempting by offering this definition to rule out empiricist approaches to particular questions on an a priori basis; I am simply suggesting (1) that the question whether empirical inquiry is the right way to resolve a given question is not itself an empirical question but that it is a properly philosophical question and (2) that a question that is properly resolved empirically is not, as I understand the term, a philosophical one.

Specific topics may be seen as objects of recognizably philosophical inquiry if they fall within these general constraints (they are, roughly, basic or highly general as well as non-empirical) or if they can be located aptly within one or more ongoing conversations that have come to be characterized as philosophical. (Obviously, the identification of individual problems and solutions as philosophical, and the identification of entire strands of inquiry and conversation as philosophical, will interact with each other in various ways.) As in the case of theology, philosophy can be concerned with understanding the ideas of thinkers or movements—here, we might speak of the history of philosophy or of comparative philosophy. Alternatively, we might be
concerned with the formulation of answers to individual philosophical problems or of entire philosophical systems—and we might speak here of constructive philosophy. It is on philosophy in this latter sense that I focus here.

When a question is explicitly philosophical, and when it is being undertaken more for its own sake than as a contribution to Christian life, we might characterize the activity of addressing it with appropriate reference to Christian belief as Christian philosophy. Philosophy can be explicitly Christian then. But it need not be. While everything has a theological context, making that context explicit won’t necessarily help to solve every philosophical problem. Philosophy ought to be Christian philosophy when the best immediate solution to a given puzzle—and not just the deep grounding for the solution or some aspect of it—involves explicit appeal to some element of Christian belief.

Consider the evolutionary argument against naturalism, offered by Christian philosophers including Stephen R. L. Clark and Alvin Plantinga. This argument holds, roughly, that naturalism implies belief in unguided evolution; that belief in unguided evolution implies that, at least where they’re focused on abstract issues, our cognitive faculties are unreliable; and that our cognitive faculties as understood by naturalists thus can’t be relied on to yield good judgments about the merits of naturalism itself (because naturalism is a theory, and so an abstract idea or set of ideas), so that naturalism in effect saws off the branch on which it’s sitting. Clark and Plantinga formulate this argument as self-consciously Christian philosophers. They don’t articulate their respective versions of it using theological premises, though one could certainly appeal to it in an explicitly theological context, as among the pointers to the effectiveness and comprehensive validity of Christian belief. If one drew on the Christian tradition as a context for one’s argument, one would, I think, be doing Christian theology or (depending on one’s purpose) Christian philosophy. If one didn’t do this, one would be doing philosophy.
III. Clarifying Relationships

A. Introduction

On the understanding of theology (I’ll drop “Christian” for simplicity’s sake) and philosophy I’ve elaborated, these two intellectual activities share multiple foci. At the same time, not all theological questions are philosophical ones, and not all philosophical questions are theological ones. After explaining where I believe the two activities do and don’t overlap (Sections B and C), I seek to clarify their relationship by explaining briefly (Section D) how I understand the contested pairs faith and reason and revelation and reason, saying something along the way about my understanding of revelation more generally. I explain how we might understand differences in method between the two activities (Section E) before considering, in particular, the role of tradition in our theological and philosophical inquiries (Section F).

B. Philosophical Questions Need Not Be Theological

Many philosophical questions are not theological because they have relatively little to do with the content, adequacy, and implications of Christian beliefs. Topics characteristically of interest in the philosophy of chemistry, say, might not be immediately relevant to theological concerns—even though, if all of reality is rooted in the being and activity of God, there will finally be some connections. This isn’t a hard and fast point, of course, but it seems as if issues in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics will be most salient to theology. Issues in the philosophy of science (issues focused on scientific method and on the character of science as a social practice) will likely be relevant to questions of theological method (not, per se, to the substance of theology but rather to what, following Fritz Guy, we might call metatheology). Whether particular questions in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics actually are at the same time theological questions or are just relevant to such questions will depend on what the specific questions are. The less significance these questions have for the content, adequacy, and implications of Christian belief, the less it will make sense to think of them as even potentially theological.

C. Theological Questions Need Not Be Philosophical

While philosophy is concerned with more or less generic features of reality, theology is concerned sometimes with these but sometimes also with matters of fact that seem, at least (some theologians would say otherwise) to be contingent. On the Christian view, God’s self-disclosure occurs not only in experience or through what we learn about the character of creation-in-general but also in history. Whether God became incarnate in and as a particular first-century Galilean rabbi is not something metaphysically necessary; it could have been otherwise. And so it certainly can’t be known through a priori inquiry.

That does not mean, of course, that more general considerations, whether theological or philosophical ones, might not be relevant to these historical questions. We might think here of Karl Rahner’s suggestion that the Incarnation is the clearest possible expression of God’s immanent presence in creation, a suggestion intended to help us see the occurrence of the Incarnation as thoroughly unsurprising even if not strictly necessary. We might think, too, of Richard Swinburne’s proposal that we should expect a priori both a divine incarnation and its validation by (1) the behavior of the person who is God incarnate and (2) a miraculous sign of divine approval, a proposal Swinburne pairs with the idea that Jesus of Nazareth is far more likely to qualify as the expected divine incarnation than any historical alternative of whom we are aware. This latter point is contingent, historical. But Swinburne offers a particular way of thinking about the evidence that shows how that evidence, even if limited, might provide robust support for Christian belief.

The more general moves made by thinkers like Rahner and Swinburne might be worked out in ways that we could regard as philosophical or in ways we could regard as theological. Suppose we began with abstract conceptions of God and divine activity elaborated and defended without reference to a richer understanding.
of God as conceived of by Christians. In this case, we might see the arguments in question as propaedeutic to theology, but not as themselves theological. On the other hand, if we began from within the frame of Christian belief and sought to show how making the sorts of assumptions that Rahner or Swinburne made tended to illuminate Christian beliefs and render them more internally supportive or consistent, we might see ourselves as doing theology.

There is always a Christian context for any truth because God is at the root of everything, necessary and contingent. But this doesn’t mean that this connection needs to be made in order to make a given truth apparent. A Christian might believe, for instance, that the truth-makers for logical or epistemological or moral or aesthetic propositions were aspects of the necessary being of God. In this case, a full account of these propositions would entail reference to God, but it wouldn’t follow that this deep metaphysical point needed to be made in order to assess these propositions. Similarly, a Christian might judge that we have been made for conscious communion with God and that God would always have intended that we be conscious, something that might serve as a deep explanation for the presence of consciousness in the world. But it wouldn’t follow that we needed to refer to this to establish that we, at least, were conscious, given the inescapable reality of our own consciousness, even though reference to the purposes of God might figure in a deep explanation of the existence of consciousness.

D. Faith, Reason, and Revelation

Distinguishing theology from philosophy isn’t the same thing as distinguishing faith from reason or revelation from reason.

Faith is trust, an attitude or disposition of reliance, a choice to rely. It is thus not a shortcut to belief, a mechanism for generating or assessing beliefs that is an alternative to critical reflection. As Austin Farrer observes with particular reference to the question of the reality of God: “Anyone can see that faith is the attitude appropriate towards the God of Christians. Supposing we
believe that there is such a God, and supposing we are reasonable beings, we shall trust him to do for us what the Gospel promises in his name; and trusting is faith. We shall trust him, if he exists, but we can hardly trust him to exist.”8

Similarly, divine revelation is what grounds, what explains, the availability of truths about God. It is not an alternative to reason as a basis for evaluating claims about what those truths are. Revelation can be concerned with both contingent and necessary truths. Whether a given event occurred is a contingent historical matter. And whether that event discloses God’s nature, character, purposes, projects in the world with exceptional clarity is, again, a contingent historical matter. (We may use “revelation” or “special revelation” with particular reference to events that disclose in this way.) However, the content of any revelation regarding God’s nature, character, and general purposes is not contingent, because God’s nature, character, and general purposes are themselves necessary. We may come to see that God is love more clearly because of the Incarnation, but that God is love is not itself a contingent historical matter but a necessary feature of the divine being, of who God is. Of course, the disclosure that God is love in and through the Incarnation may in turn feed back into our more general understanding of God and lead us to see more general reasons to regard God as love. However, the Incarnation might not be the only path to this recognition.

There may be exceptions here. For instance, we might think that God’s self-disclosure—say, the resurrection of Jesus—highlighted for us God’s intention to confer life beyond death in a way to which the resurrection of the body was integral. But perhaps there might be multiple forms that personal life beyond death could take, not all of them involving bodily resurrection. When what God does is contingent, then the content of revelation regarding what God does will be contingent.

All knowledge of God comes from God; where else would it come from? The same is true of all knowledge of the world and of all knowledge of ourselves. Whatever we know, we know because the action of God the Creator is at the root of the existence and operation of our cognitive faculties, because the Logos is “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (John 1:9), because the Spirit acts to “guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). To say that God is present and active everywhere is to say that divine revelation takes place in and through nature (however defined), experience, rational reflection, history (in no case without mediation, in no case infallibly). There is thus no such thing as “natural theology” if this is taken to be an alternative to theology rooted in divine self-revelation.

While God is the Revealer, while God is constantly engaged in divine self-disclosure, and while all knowledge of God is rooted in God’s action, God’s self-disclosing work does not somehow bypass human finitude, fallibility, and sin or the factors that constrain divine action generally, the factors in virtue of which God’s intentions are all-too-frequently not realized in the world. All knowledge of God is knowledge from God, but it is not therefore conveyed to us free of mediation and constraint, and it does not therefore exempt us from the need to engage in critical reflection and scrutiny—not because we are entitled to question whether God

Faith is trust, an attitude or disposition of reliance, a choice to rely. It is thus not a shortcut to belief, a mechanism for generating or assessing beliefs that is an alternative to critical reflection.
is truthful but because we need to know whether any particular proposed belief aptly characterizes God. And of course we need to recognize that our own critical reflection and scrutiny are elements of the process by which God seeks to communicate effectively. Divine communication doesn’t stop with a mystical insight or the production of a document because God is at work in and through our reception and transmission of any idea or assertion.

E. Distinguishing Philosophical and Theological Methods

Theology and philosophy need not employ different methods when addressing the same questions. But theology addresses questions that are not philosophical and that cannot be addressed, therefore, in the same way as philosophical questions.

Theology is always systematic in a way that philosophy need not be. It is concerned with our understanding God and God’s world and our lives before God in that world, and that means that a broad range of issues will always, in principle, be in view whenever theological ideas are being formulated. It is necessarily comprehensive, at least implicitly. By contrast, while philosophical ideas are cross-connected, too, it may be easier when doing philosophy to consider particular claims in relative isolation (though, of course, one can choose to address them in relation to a particular system).

There are differences in topic between theology and philosophy. There are not, I think, deep and insurmountable differences in method. Theological topics that are not philosophical in character can’t be addressed using philosophical methods. But the topics that are common to both may be reasonably addressed using the same or similar methods. And while philosophers may attempt to grapple with these questions in other ways, it is certainly open to Christians to approach philosophical and theological questions using the same means.

It is sometimes assumed that, while theological reflection takes place within the broad bounds of the Christian tradition, philosophy is undertaken in something close to an intellectual vacuum. But, as I’ve already noted, philosophical questions can be addressed self-consciously from within the setting provided by Christian belief. At the same time, Christian belief leaves open considerable room for intellectual experimentation, and philosophical inquiry by Christians doesn’t require explicit reference to Christian belief. Both theology and philosophy, it seems to me, require clarity, internal coherence, and consistency with our best-considered judgments about other relevant matters. These judgments may themselves sometimes be modified in something like reflective equilibrium, though in other cases this may not be possible, as when modifying them might entail logical error, performative self-contradiction, or denial of the inescapable (like the reality of consciousness).

There’s a long history of doing theology in light of particular philosophical systems. Theologians have rightly protested against the captivity of theology to these and other systems. At the same time, systems like these can be understood as embodying theological insights rather than as external constraints on theology. The choice to employ them theologically can be seen as reflecting judgments about their congruence with preexisting theological convictions in search of more careful and rigorous articulation.

While appeals to philosophical systems can thus be theologically guided so that the systems are in some sense subordinate to theology, we do not need to do philosophy in the sense of proposing anything like a metaphysical system before we can do theology. There is nothing wrong with bringing an independently developed philosophical system into conversation with theology and seeking to learn from it, but there is also no reason not to approach philosophical questions from the beginning theologically. We can begin from within the frame provided by Christian belief and seek to understand its explanatory power rather than bracketing Christian belief. In the same way, though philosophy needn’t presuppose theological categories, of course it can in particular cases proceed by employing those
categories, just as it certainly may take them as objects of reflection or analysis.

We can do theology without appealing to philosophical systems. But we can’t do theology without philosophical analysis, without thinking about the logic and internal coherence of our theological proposals, their consistency with the inescapably evident, and about their reflective equilibration with our experience and intuitions. Good theology and good philosophy will involve careful attention to the use of words, the logic of arguments, and the consistency of assertions as well as of background assumptions.

F. The Role and Constraints of Tradition

There is a distinctive Christian tradition (or set of interweaving traditions) of reflection, inquiry, and conversation, all of it relevant to theology and some of it concerned with specifically philosophical topics.

None of us begins in a vacuum. Except in the most exceptional of cases, we arrive in the world immersed in particular social worlds. We acquire languages, ideas, attitudes, and habits of mind before we are in a position to reflect on them critically. It is perfectly reasonable to begin thinking, judging, reflecting from where we are, from how we have been taught to experience the world. We do not need to begin, or attempt to begin, or pretend that we have begun, from scratch, building up an intellectual system on what we personally identify as undeniable foundations. Rather, we can perfectly well begin within a tradition, even as we reflect upon, critique, and enlarge that tradition.

That does not mean, of course, that we have any reason to regard our tradition or any other tradition as infallible or incapable of growth; it is, after all, the product of finite, error-prone, sinful creatures like ourselves. It simply means that we can accept without any sort of diffidence the recognition that we begin thinking theologically and philosophically in via and that we have good reason to welcome the gifts our tradition has given us. In the particular form in which we ourselves appropriate it (there will be as many such forms as there are participants), that tradition can, in turn, be validated as it survives credible challenges, as criticisms are either shown to be unsuccessful or else taken into account as the tradition is adjusted. The authority of tradition comes from its ongoing success in responding to challenges and its successful incorporation of our insights and experiences. And the prior success of a tradition—its winnowing of ideas and sedimentation of experience, wisdom, and insight—give us good reason to give the tradition a modicum of trust.⁹

Traditions are important but not all-determining. The experience we have as Christians is undoubtedly shaped by our immersion in the Christian tradition. But we are not isolated, immune to all other influences; we live in a variety of overlapping, intersecting streams of cultural influence, each of which offers lenses through which we

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⁹ This is a simplified version of the argument. The full argument includes a discussion of the historical development of Christian thought and the ways in which it has been shaped by particular contexts and experiences. The argument also acknowledges the role of cultural and historical factors in shaping theological and philosophical thought, and the importance of critical engagement with other traditions and perspectives.
can look at the world and proposals for our consideration. And, if the Logos is the light that enlightens everyone, we should recognize that the various traditions other than the Christian tradition that affect us may be sources of insight and that it may on occasion be possible for us to frame questions and discern answers not necessarily proposed or vouchsafed to us by any developed tradition.

Our experience can break through tradition-rooted constraints. Mark Twain’s most famous novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, remains a powerful literary reminder of this possibility. In the novel, Huck wrestles with the demands of a conscience shaped by a profoundly distorted religious tradition, one that teaches him that keeping other people enslaved is not only permissible but required. While he understands himself to be choosing his own damnation when he opts for friendship with Jim over obedience to what he mistakenly supposes is the law of God, he is in fact—we can see even if he doesn’t—responding to the actual demands of both justice and interpersonal loyalty. His experience of the inescapable humanity of his friend trumps what a profoundly broken moral tradition has taught him. Traditions don’t shackle us, even if they often guide us.

**IV. Conclusion**

Philosophy and theology have many functions, but I suspect a particularly important one is therapeutic: they help to clarify, refine, and revise religious ideas, attitudes, and practices that have proven conceptually muddled, spiritually toxic, or both. These two activities can play their therapeutic roles effectively when they are understood and carried on subject to common methodological constraints and in a complexly overlapping fashion.

Philosophy and theology can be defined in relatively abstract terms: philosophy explores non-empirical questions that are basic to various strands of existence and inquiry; theology considers the content, adequacy, and implications of Christian belief in a way that is intended to be supportive of Christian existence. Both can also be understood in historical-cum-cultural terms as activities in meaningful continuity with recognizable histories of intellectual practice undertaken by (sometimes overlapping) self-identified guilds.

Philosophy and theology both require clarity and coherence. Theory and more systematic varieties of philosophy also require at least implicit attention to the comprehensive context within which each takes place. Philosophy and theology are concerned with questions that are fundamental to our existence, to our experience, to our discourse. Many of the topics they consider are the same. And both, when done well, are marked by precision, transparency, and rigor of thought and expression. Even though we don’t need to begin with a methodological essay every time we engage in each activity, each deserves to be informed, shaped, and constrained in virtue of deliberate, reflective awareness of what we are doing and why.

Many topics are common to both activities. They include the reality and nature of God, creation, divine self-communication and other forms of divine action, the

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**Formal requirements for the practice of philosophy and theology:**

- clarity
- coherence
- comprehensiveness

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meaning of talk about God’s becoming incarnate, the significance of particular understandings of salvation, the nature of human persons (including their identities and their capacities for freedom), what might be involved in particular accounts of hope beyond death for creatures, the nature of moral judgment, the shape of a good life, and, perhaps, the character of theology as a science. On the other hand, some topics are distinctive to theology, among them the identification of the historical person Jesus of Nazareth as God incarnate and claims regarding the significance of his ministry, death, and life beyond death. Some topics, similarly, are philosophical but not theological—lacking clear roots in Christian belief or immediate relevance for personal or corporate Christian existence—even though even here they may be addressed in part by drawing on Christian beliefs, in the activity we might call Christian philosophy. Both philosophy and theology are responses to divine revelation. Theology, in particular, is rooted in the Christian tradition, though it serves not simply to repeat or even to paraphrase what has already been said by Christians but also to contribute to the tradition’s enrichment and growth. While philosophy can be carried on with overt reference to Christian belief, it will often not be, even when undertaken by Christian philosophers. Recognizing the tradition-laden character of intellectual inquiry does not mean that people are trapped by tradition; people can discern insights obscured or ignored by their traditions. At the same time, it will make sense for Christians doing philosophy to bring what they believe, understand, know as Christians to bear on the philosophical problems they address.

We don’t need to distinguish sharply between philosophy and theology when we examine questions of Christian, or specifically Adventist, belief—and, indeed, in many other contexts. Whether what we’re doing counts, finally, as philosophy or theology or both, what matters most is that it reflects the concern with clarity, coherence, and comprehensiveness common to good philosophy and good theology alike.
Ellen G. White, the visionary co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is credited with many miraculous powers. She is said to have experienced long public visions during which she did not breathe.¹ Some say she spoke audible words and even shouted during those breathless visions.² Her most ardent defenders believe that her visions showed her historical scenes that she then later described using words from historians that matched what she already knew from her visions.³ Another legend has her holding a heavy Bible above her head while pointing to texts and reciting them correctly although she could not see them.⁴ Many years after the Civil War ended, some claimed that she had predicted the war.⁵ And one could cite many, many more examples.

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This essay deals with one of those miraculous claims. It seeks to establish an objective evaluation of the reliability of the eyewitness claims that Ellen White didn’t breathe during her visions. It does not try to prove whether White did or did not do so during them. For an educated secular person, this whole essay may appear utterly unnecessary. After all, simple human physiology proves no one can stay alive without breathing. But each individual, family, and group have their own legends about natural, supernatural, historical, and paranormal phenomena. Here I will seek to apply historical research to this particular Adventist claim.

Eighteen-year-old Ellen Harmon published an account of her first vision in the January 24, 1846, issue of the Millerite paper, *The Day Star*, dating her “Letter from Sister Harmon” December 20, 1845. Saying nothing about her condition while in vision, she particularly made no mention of any breathlessness.

Earlier in 1845, an African American Millerite preacher, William Foy, published an account of two visions he had experienced back in 1842. He said that as he went into vision “my breath left me.” A doctor who examined him found “no appearance of life, except around the heart,” and eight witnesses swore they also observed his “apparently inanimate condition.” Ellen White accepted Foy’s visions as genuine divine revelations, but interestingly, J. N. Loughborough, who was so zealous to prove White didn’t breathe during her visions, failed to mention Foy’s breathless state during his visions.

In 1848, James White, whom Ellen had married in August of 1846, made the earliest claim for her breathless condition in vision. In a private letter to friends, he wrote, “she was in vision one and a half hours in which time she did not breathe at all.” James does not say how he ascertained that she did not breathe or if anyone tested her condition. His 1848 claim was in a private letter. He placed nothing in print about Ellen’s breathless visions until 1868.

The first published statement about Ellen White not breathing while in vision didn’t appear until 1859 when D. T. Bourdeau reported “she was breathless” during her visions. White herself reported on many of her visions in her 1860 book, *Spiritual Gifts*, volume two, but said nothing about not breathing during them. So, White had been having visions for fifteen years before any claims of her breathlessness became public. In 1866 Loughborough issued the first published report of a specific vision during which he claimed she was breathless.

Eventually White herself came to believe she didn’t breathe during her early visions. But she didn’t comment on the topic until 1906 when she said: “Sometimes while I was in vision, my friends would approach me and exclaim, ‘Why, she does not breathe!’ Placing a mirror before my lips, they found that no moisture gathered on the glass. And it was while there was no sign of any breathing that I kept talking of the things that were being presented before me.” Such reported phenomena were, to her, evidence of the “wonder-working power of God.” Some Adventist readers of this essay may conclude that even if one could raise doubt about such eyewitness accounts, her acceptance of such reports proves, for them, that she did not breathe during her visions.

Through the years, most Adventist writers have claimed Daniel 10:17 shows that the Bible prophet Daniel did not breathe during a vision. The implication is that not breathing while in vision offers proof of its divine origin. However, the plain sense of the text is that Daniel’s breath was momentarily taken away because he was so awed and surprised. The King James Version reads: “For how can the servant of this my lord talk with this my lord? for as for me, straightway there remained no strength in me, neither is there breath left in me.” Essentially, he’s saying, “How can a lowly servant like me even talk with a magnificent Lord like you? The very
idea makes me weak in the knees and takes my breath away.” Among the Adventist pioneers, only Uriah Smith agreed with this interpretation, saying the prophet was “so affected by the view that . . . his breath ceased.” It is like an author wrote when she described an awe-inspiring landscape: “its startling beauty took my breath away. I say it took my breath away because . . . it literally took my breath away.” But in her writings, White never used Daniel 10:17 to bolster the idea that her visions were genuine revelations from God.

As time went on, her visions declined in frequency. By the 1870s, she experienced only two public visions, one on December 10, 1871, and the other on January 3, 1875. Witnesses to the 1871 vision reported no physical phenomena. As for her last public vision on January 3, 1875, Willie White did state that she did not breathe during that vision, but mentioned no tests being done on her. After that (and even before) she considered many of her dreams to be revelatory experiences, and by 1888 took to calling them “visions of the night.”

More than thirty individuals said they were eyewitnesses to one of White’s public visions. Of them, fifteen claimed that she was not breathing during the particular vision they observed. Among those fifteen witnesses, fewer than ten said that someone examined her by holding a mirror or lighted candle near her nose or lips, or even covering her mouth and pinching her nose closed.

Adventist believers might think it impossible that fifteen eyewitnesses could be wrong. But Mormon believers might consider it impossible that eleven eyewitnesses could be wrong about seeing the golden plates from which Joseph Smith derived the Book of Mormon.

What happens when a person cannot or does not breathe? “Permanent brain damage begins after only 4 minutes without oxygen, and death can occur as soon as 4 to 6 minutes later.” A University of Michigan website says that after five to ten minutes of not breathing, a person is likely to develop serious and possibly irreversible brain damage. Recovery is virtually impossible after fifteen minutes.

In Ellen White’s case, especially in the early days when she fell into trance during scenes of ecstatic singing and shouting (and thus hyperventilation), her breathing may have been virtually imperceptible, but may also have been varied or intermittent. She may have sometimes been drawing in more air, at least enough to sustain life and prevent brain damage. Although she was occasionally examined during her visions, it was not every few minutes throughout her often extended visions.

We do not have the direct testimonies of eleven of

“I saw Sister Ellen G. White in vision for the first time. I was an unbeliever in the visions; but one circumstance among others that I might mention convinced me that her visions were of God.”

D. T. Bourdeau, Feb. 4, 1891.
the fifteen eyewitnesses who claimed White did not breathe during vision. Instead, Adventist evangelist J. N. Loughborough quoted statements from them in his books and during the Church’s General Conference session in 1893. But he is not always a reliable historian.

It is axiomatic that historians should seek the most original sources for any evidence they cite, so it would be much better if we had the actual signed documents in which the eyewitnesses claimed White did not breathe. That is especially the case, because here an individual with recognized biases quoted the documents into the record. Unfortunately, bias can even result in falsified documents. Loughborough himself omitted crucial words without ellipses in his 1905 book. And he “quoted” directly from the same letter of a Mrs. Truesdail in both his 1892 and 1905 books, but added nine words to the letter in 1905. White’s grandson, Arthur White, also showed how bias can lead one to alter a document. Ellen White once asked her daughter-in-law to get her a “box of herrings” and “a few cans of good oysters.” When that handwritten letter was first transcribed under Arthur’s supervision in the 1950s, the typist omitted the reference to oysters without any ellipsis. It was hard for Arthur to concede that his grandmother had asked for what the Bible defined as unclean meat. Later the error was corrected, and an accurate transcription of the letter is online at the White Estate website today.

of a White vision, he showed a tendency to omit, expand, or elaborate.

Back in 1978, Rolf Pöhler, then a seminary student, classified Loughborough as “extremely careless.” He placed Loughborough’s work “among the worst examples of SDA apologetics” for its “misleading approach” and “irresponsible use of the documents.” In his biography of Loughborough, Brian Strayer spoke of Loughborough’s “subtle spins and deliberate omissions,” noting a few obvious errors and a number of impossible exaggerations. In my own 2018 article on Loughborough, I concluded that “Loughborough consistently embellishes, omits, and distorts history so as to defend or enhance the reputation of Ellen White.” According to her son, even Ellen White was “sorry” that Loughborough “had made her so prominent” in his book.

Loughborough acquired—probably solicited—the signed statements of eyewitnesses to the visions during 1890 and 1891 as he prepared his 1892 book, The Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists. If, in the process of obtaining these statements, he asked these informants to compare their recollections with James White’s descriptions of Ellen in vision in his 1868 book, a high degree of suggestibility could have been in play. Encouraged by James’s descriptions, those individuals could have innocently come to believe they had witnessed breathlessness, when in fact they had not. Even if Loughborough had not prompted them to look at
earlier descriptions of Ellen White in vision, they might have been already familiar with them, and thus had their memories tainted by them.

Suggestibility may even have been in play in the reports that White spoke audible words while not breathing. There could have been visions during which her breathing was imperceptible, and other, different visions during which she shouted or spoke audible words. And the eyewitnesses, aware that both phenomena had been reported, may have come to believe that White had exhibited both during the specific vision they observed, when in fact she did not.

The eyewitnesses whose accounts include mention of miraculous physical phenomena were relatively young at the time, ranging in age from six years to twenty-nine. When they reported their memories, they were between ages fifty-eight and ninety-one. The average lapse of time between what they witnessed and when they reported was fifty-four years. During those years, we cannot know what stories circulated orally among such early believers. There seems to have been plenty of time for memories to become mixed, muddled, and modified. Again, we must keep in mind that the reports of visions published immediately after they occurred make no mention of breathlessness.

In his book *An Anthropologist on Mars*, the late British neurologist Oliver Sacks includes an insightful discussion of the malleability and variability of the human memory in his chapter “The Landscape of His Dreams.”32 Another more extensive discussion of memory appears in Harvard psychologist Daniel L. Schacter’s book *The Seven Sins of Memory* in which he discusses how transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence can all undermine, alter, and corrupt our memories.33

A couple of the statements Loughborough collected offer different versions of the same event. A Drusilla Lamson reported that during an 1854 vision someone checked White’s breathless state by use of a “looking glass,” but it showed no sign of moisture condensation. However, the very next witness, a David Seeley, who claims to have been present during the same vision, says that someone tested White by holding a lighted candle near her lips and that the flame showed “not the slightest flicker.” So, was she examined with a mirror or with a candle? Some might speculate that it could have been both ways. But if that were the case, why didn’t one of the witnesses report the use of both methods during that particular vision?

Loughborough’s own most dramatic eyewitness account illustrates his tendency to introduce changes into different versions of his stories. He was present in Parkville, Michigan, on January 12, 1861, when he states that White experienced a vision. Yet James White reported on that 1861 meeting in Parkville but made no mention of any vision his wife may have had there.34

Still, she doubtless did have a vision there, for she herself mentioned a vision at Parkville in a letter of rebuke and warning to a young man she addressed as “Dear Friend William.” But that letter makes no mention of the circumstances Loughborough describes.35

Loughborough didn’t publish his eyewitness report on the events at Parkville until five years later (1866). He then stated that during that vision a spiritualist/mesmerizer was present. The man had claimed he could bring her out of her visions in a minute. According to Loughborough, the spiritualist began to approach her, then suddenly fled in consternation and confusion, exclaiming, “She don’t breathe.”

Loughborough’s account of the incident at Parkville bears an uncanny resemblance to Ellen White’s description of her encounter with “J. T.” in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume two. This “J. T.” had “boasted that he understood the art of mesmerism, and that he could mesmerize me; that he could prevent me from having a vision.” As she started to relate one of her visions, she began to fear that J. T. was trying to mesmerize her and force her to stop. She pled for another angel, received one, and when J. T.’s efforts failed, the people there asked him why he had not prevented her from recounting her vision.36

In the first expansion of his 1866 story in his 1892 book, *Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists*, Loughborough called the spiritualist “Dr. Brown.”
In 1861 a spiritualist journal listed among its members a J. S. Brown in Albion, Michigan. That was fifty miles from Parkville, but spiritualists often traveled to lecture and demonstrate their skills.\textsuperscript{37} It is uncertain whether this J. S. Brown was actually the same spiritualist/mesmerizer from 1861 or whether Loughborough ran across his name later and the man seemed to fit the bill. A city directory of 1874-1875 described Brown as a “clairvoyant and eclectic physician.”\textsuperscript{38}

If Loughborough actually knew him as Dr. Brown back in 1861, he probably didn’t mention his name because he was most concerned to prove that mesmerism did not cause White’s visions and thus referred to Brown merely as a spiritualist and mesmerist. After all, White, in \textit{Spiritual Gifts}, volume two, had often mentioned that detractors suspected mesmerism produced her visions. Then too, Loughborough’s fellow Adventist evangelist, Moses Hull, had become a spiritualist in 1862.\textsuperscript{39} However, when Loughborough retold the Parkville story in 1892, the physicians at Battle Creek Sanitarium held a more prominent role in Adventist culture, so now Loughborough emphasized Brown’s status as a doctor.

In the 1892 version of the Parkville story, Dr. Brown had not only started to approach White when he fled (as in the 1866 story) but had actually begun a medical examination, then turned “deathly pale and shook like an aspen leaf.” But in a still later (1899) version, the doctor had completed his examination.\textsuperscript{40} Also in 1892, Loughborough improved the doctor’s grammar and quoted his words as “She does not breathe” instead of “She don’t breathe.”

Finally, in a 1911 recitation of the story, he said that it was “afterward learned” that the spiritualist had earlier boasted that he could snap her out of her visions within a minute.\textsuperscript{41} But back in the 1892 account, the people at the door seemed to already know what Loughborough said was only “afterward learned.” They stopped the doctor and asked him to go ahead and bring her out of her vision as he had boasted that he could (just as the people halted “J.T.” in White’s 1860 account). So, Loughborough expanded and altered his own different accounts of the encounter with the spiritualist “doctor” during the Parkville vision.

But then, in the 1892 \textit{Rise and Progress}, Loughborough added a whole new and different account of what happened in Parkville in 1861. He put the story of the spiritualist “doctor” in one part of the book,\textsuperscript{42} but inserted a new version 139 pages later.\textsuperscript{43} He never linked the two even though he claims they both occurred in connection with the January 12, 1861, vision in Parkville, Michigan.

Loughborough’s new story was that when White came out of her January, 1861, vision in Parkville, she predicted an extensive and bloody war and that some members of the congregation would lose sons in that conflict. The Civil War didn’t get underway until three months later on April 12 with the firing on Fort Sumter. Yet White made no mention of war in the February 1861 letter she wrote based on her Parkville vision.

Remember, Loughborough published his first account of the Parkville vision in December 1866. The war had ended a year and a half earlier at Appomattox. And yet, while reporting a vision that took place just before the war, he does not mention the alleged Civil War prediction. He only tells about the spiritualist “doctor” who fled the scene. One would think that when he first reported the Parkville vision in 1866, a Civil War prediction would have been very interesting to his readers since it had just been fulfilled. But no, he waits until 1892 to relate that story.

Loughborough’s 1892 account includes phrases White used in \textit{Testimony for the Church}, Number 7, in describing a vision about the war. Of course, it would. \textit{Testimony} Number 7 begins with a report of White’s vision of January 4, 1862, which occurred well after the war was underway and a year following her Parkville vision. Her words in \textit{Testimony} Number 7 were some of the scraps that he stitched together thirty years later in 1892 in \textit{Rise and Progress} as part of his Civil War prediction story. Eric Anderson noted that there is “no contemporary confirmation of this dramatic prediction.”\textsuperscript{44} Nevertheless, Roger Coon included it in his 1992 book, \textit{The Great Visions of Ellen G. White}.\textsuperscript{45}

It is true that White warmly recommended
Loughborough’s 1892 book and urged its increased promotion. Nor did she ever suggest that the Civil War prediction story was false or should be removed. But, of course, the story of a Civil War prediction at Parkville would have sounded perfectly plausible to her when she read it many years after the event. She probably didn’t remember exactly what she said when she came out of vision in 1861. In fact, Loughborough’s story would have sounded familiar because he was borrowing some of the very words that she used in her 1862 testimony.

One piece of evidence, however, might argue for the authenticity of Loughborough’s claim of a Civil War prediction in early 1861. In this case, it’s not an eyewitness account but what Loughborough says someone wrote to him about what another person said to her! He quoted a letter from a Martha Ensign:

“This certifies that I was living in St. Joseph Co., Mich., in January, 1861, about six miles from Parkville. I was not an Adventist. On the 12th day of that month, a number of my neighbors went to Parkville to attend meetings. When they came home, they told me that there was a woman at the meeting that was in a trance, and who said that there was a terrible war coming on the United States; that large armies were going to be raised on both sides, in the South as well as in the North, and there would be many who would suffer in prisons; and pinching want would be felt in many families.

Loughborough’s new story was that when Ellen White came out of her January, 1861, vision in Parkville, she predicted an extensive and bloody war and that some members of the congregation would lose sons in that conflict.
in consequence of losing husbands, sons, and brothers in the war; and that there were men in the house who would lose sons in that war.

Signed, Martha V. Ensign, Wild Flower, Fresno Co., Cal., Jan. 30, 1891. 47

Either this is an accurate recollection, or perhaps Ensign recalled her neighbors telling her about a woman who had had a trance, and little else. Then later, after she became an Adventist, 48 she read White’s vision about the war in *Testimony for the Church*, Number 7 (1862).

“Ah,” she possibly mused to herself, “that’s just the sort of thing my neighbors said Ellen White spoke about.” In that vision White told of the horrors of war and the “pinching want” in many homes. Ensign claims her neighbors used those same words (“pinching want”) to describe what White said.

It could also be that as Loughborough solicited her testimony, he told Ensign about the incident that he was trying to confirm. How else would she recall the very date of the incident? She had been twenty-seven years old in 1861, and wrote her letter thirty years later in 1891 when she was fifty-seven. Considering her possible bias as a believing Adventist, the possible influence of White’s 1862 vision about the Civil War, and knowing how one’s memory can alter over thirty years, as well as that Loughborough could have altered the wording of Ensign’s letter, we may harbor reasonable doubt whether her letter actually confirms Loughborough’s narrative. 49

His altered accounts of White’s breathlessness during the Parkville vision and his telling two separate versions of what happened during and after that vision also cast reasonable doubt on Loughborough’s own claim that White didn’t breathe during the Parkville vision.

Among the most striking of the eyewitness accounts that Loughborough reported was that of D. T. Bourdeau. Loughborough said the vision Bourdeau witnessed took place in Buck’s Bridge, New York. Here is what Loughborough quoted Bourdeau as having written:

June 28, 1857, I saw Sister Ellen G. White in vision for the first time. I was an unbeliever in the visions; but one circumstance among others that I might mention convinced me that her visions were of God. To satisfy my mind as to whether she breathed or not, I first put my hand on her chest sufficiently long to know that there was no more heaving of the lungs than there would have been had she been a corpse. I then took my hand and placed it over her mouth, pinching her nostrils between my thumb and forefinger, so that it was impossible for her to exhale or inhale air, even if she had desired to do so. I held her thus with my hand about ten minutes, long enough for her to suffocate under ordinary circumstances; she was not in the least affected by this ordeal. Since witnessing this wonderful phenomenon, I have not once been inclined to doubt the divine origin of her visions.

Signed, D. T. Bourdeau, Battle Creek, Mich., Feb. 4, 1891. 50

Bourdeau’s eyewitness account has several problems. At the time of writing, he was a fifty-six-year-old man trying to recall something that happened thirty-four years earlier. Just after the meeting in Buck’s Bridge in 1857, James White reported it in the *Review*. 51 He made no mention of any vision having taken place, nor do we find any reference to a vision in June or July of 1857 anywhere in either Ellen’s or James’s letters or other publications, or the records left behind by any other person.

The meeting at Buck’s Bridge occurred June 20, 1857, not on June 28, as Bourdeau dated it. It is possible that at some other time and at some other place (both of which are uncertain to us, and apparently to him), Bourdeau saw Ellen White in vision. And it is possible that James said something that gave the twenty-two-year-old, newly-converted Bourdeau the feeling that he had permission to physically examine Ellen. He says he first felt her chest and detected no expansion or contraction of the lungs; then he placed his hand over her mouth and pinched her nose with his thumb and forefinger for ten minutes.

No one was there with a stopwatch, and even if he only held her nose and mouth closed for a minute or
two, it doubtless seemed like a much longer time. By 1891 Bourdeau’s memory may have extended the time by several minutes. Then Loughborough, certain as he was that White could survive without breathing for two or three hours, may have adjusted the text of Bourdeau’s letter so that it would claim he deprived her of breath for ten minutes. We can’t put it past Loughborough to have also added the words “long enough for her to suffocate under ordinary circumstances.” After all, he had added words to Truesdale’s letter apparently just to make it more clear what he thought she meant. Such conclusions are speculative, of course, but along with Loughborough’s unreliability as a historian and Bourdeau’s obvious mistake in saying when or where the incident took place, plus the fact that we have no other evidence that White even had a vision in June or July of 1857, together suggest that the validity of Bourdeau’s testimony is open to reasonable doubt.

In 1919, A. G. Daniells, who was at that time still president of the General Conference, expressed his opinion that evidence of White not breathing during her visions was not very convincing proof of her being a divinely inspired prophet. It had been a long time, he said, since he (Daniells) had ever employed that sort of thing: “no breath in the body, eyes wide open.” It may have happened early in her career, he thought, but not later. Yet he said, “I believe this gift was just as genuine and exercised just the same through these later years as in the early years.” As for her holding a large Bible aloft and quoting texts without looking at them, he said he didn’t know how much of that story was genuine and how much had just “crawled into” it.52

Later in the meeting in which Daniells made his statement, Clifton Taylor, at the time a young college teacher from Canada, asked the General Conference president to clarify his position. Taylor wanted to know whether Daniells actually disbelieved those miracle stories or whether he merely felt there were more persuasive arguments for White’s prophetic gift.53 “No,” Daniells said, “I do not discount them nor disbelieve them; but they are not the kind of evidence I would use with students or with unbelievers.”54 For Daniells, it was White’s support of and consistency with the Bible’s teachings that were the best arguments for her validity as a prophet.

Today, even her interpretations of the Bible are subject to challenges, but in the end, most Adventists read her writings for inspiration—not her inspiration, but their own. Whether liberal or conservative, if they read her at all, they chose those works that most nourish and inspire their own spiritual lives. Steps to Christ certainly ranks higher than Appeal to Mothers.55 Perhaps in the future our Fundamental Belief #18 regarding White could be altered slightly to read thus: “The Scriptures testify that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. Her writings provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”

ENDNOTES:

1. The earliest report of such a breathless vision is James White’s letter to the Hastings, August 26, 1848, https://ellenwhite.org/correspondence/379857. She claimed at least one vision lasting “nearly four hours” but doesn’t mention not breathing during that vision or during any other in that book. See Spiritual Gifts vol. 2 (Battle Creek, MI: James White, 1860), 77.

2. Transcripts do exist of what she supposedly said during two of her early visions, but they make no comment about whether she was breathing or not. The transcripts are reprinted in Timothy L. Poirier, ed., The Ellen G. White Letters and Manuscripts (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2014), 113ff, 177ff. If one begins to question whether Ellen White did not breathe during her visions, the claim that she also spoke audible words while not breathing suddenly changes from a further miraculous evidence to an indication that she did in fact breathe during her visions.


4. J. N. Loughborough, Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists (Battle Creek, MI: General Conference Association, 1890), 107.

5. Loughborough, Rise and Progress, 236.


7. Loughborough, Rise and Progress, 71-73.


15. “In the last vision given me, which was on December 10, 1871, I was shown the condition of God’s people” (E. G. White to Brother Lay, January 11, 1872). A. C.
Bourdeau and D. T. Bourdeau reported on that public vision but did not note any physical phenomena. See “Important Meetings in Vermont,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 26, 1871, 14: As for her last vision, the one on January 3, 1875, in subsequent years she referred back many times specifically to that particular vision. W. C. White’s recollections of that 1875 vision appeared first in 1917 as “Remarks of W. C. White in Takoma Hall, December 17, 1905,” *Atlantic Union Glacier*, April 18, 1917, i–3. His 1905 talk had been recorded stenographically and eventually ended up in this Glacer issue. Then he expanded it considerably as “Sketches and Memories of James and Ellen G. White: A Comprehensive Vision—I,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 10, 1938, 6. J. N. Loughborough’s claim that her last public vision was at an Oregon camp meeting in 1884 cannot be credited. Such an occurrence would have been very dramatic at that late date, and a full report of her activities at the meeting, published soon afterward, made no mention of a public vision, nor did she refer to one in any letter or manuscript she wrote at the time. J.N. Loughborough, “The Study of the Testimonies—No. 2,” *Daily Bulletin of the General Conference*, March 29, 30, 1883, 20.

16. Ronald D. Graybill, “The Dream Life of Ellen G. White,” *Adventist Heritage*, Winter, 2017, 30–33. Her use of that expression became more common after 1903, but it first appears in “Ellen G. White to Brother Church,” Letter 33, March 21, 1888, in which she says, “In a vision of the night I was passing through the rooms of the institution,” then in *Testimony for the Church*, Number 33, in 1889 as “rooms of the institution,” and in 1889 in *Testimony for the Church*, Number 33, she says “a communication from the Lord comes to me, either in a dream or vision of the night.”


20. The other four testimonials were published in articles in Adventist periodicals, in one case a stenographic report of an interview conducted by Arthur L. White and his wife. Most of the eyewitness reports will appear in a numbered list in Kevin Morgan’s forthcoming book, *Glory! Glory! Glory!*


24. Alta Robinson, a long-time White Estate employee, pointed out the problem to me when I was working at the White Estate in the 1970s, and we persuaded Arthur White to have the letter retyped correctly.

25. Pöhler, “‘And the Door Was Shut’” 48-49.


38. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 29, 1899, 550


42. Loughborough, *Rise and Progress*, 97.

In 1895, an American farmer and Methodist-turned-Seventh-day-Adventist named Melvin C. Sturdevant, his wife Margaret Jane, and their son walked off their Illinois farm and set out on a lifelong journey. The first leg of their trip took them south for several years. Responding to a call from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, their first assignment led them to a small school in Graysville, Tennessee.¹

Following their time in Tennessee, the Sturdevants crossed the Atlantic to spend most of their lives in Southern Africa. They helped plant hundreds of schools in several countries and took part in establishing the first generation of Adventists on the continent.

Until the 1890s, Adventism grew intermittently. Fewer than seventy thousand members lived along the southern edge of the Great Lakes and in the state of California; very few lived outside of the United States. However, a couple of years after the 1897 reforms in Adventist education, hundreds of children

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from families experiencing poverty enrolled in Adventist schools. The Sturdevants and other couples—mostly Midwest farmers as well—spearheaded a movement that crossed the globe like a prairie fire.

Some have credited the explosive growth of Adventism at the turn of the century to leaders of the General Conference, chiefly General Conference President A. G. Daniells, who sent missionaries abroad. Richard Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, who co-wrote the official history of the Adventist Church, infer that Daniells mobilized the Church for worldwide expansion. Their thesis reflects a well-established theory that argues “great men” provoke significant changes in human history. The Scottish historian and London Library principal founder Thomas Carlyle may have been the first to articulate the “great man” theory. He wrote, “The history of the world is but the biography of great men.” The theory argues that a few men with natural abilities and talents became influential leaders.

Credit A.G. Daniells with masterminding Adventism’s early growth overlooks many men and women indispensable to the denomination’s spread. The idea that great men are the motors that propel history pushes vital histories under the rug. It leaves hundreds of contributors forgotten in folders and drawers. Most Adventists have not heard the story of Melvin and Margaret Jane Sturdevant, their two sons who both died before adulthood, or the ways they and their students introduced thousands to the Adventist faith.

While working in the American South, the Sturdevants absorbed ideas from three distinct sources: a group of Adventist laymen operating a steamship in the Mississippi Delta; the experiments of Booker T. Washington in Tuskegee, Alabama; and Ellen White in Avondale, Australia, at the time. Drawing inspiration from each, they designed and operated schools for impoverished children. They established “manual training schools,” with curriculums that prioritized agriculture and manufacturing. New Adventist
schools sprang up worldwide as pedagogical blueprints appeared in journals, personal testimonies, and books—especially White’s Education.

A few days after arriving in Graysville, Tennessee, Sturdevant got thrown in jail for cutting firewood and building a fence in his backyard. Wood cutting and fence building were not crimes, but working on Sunday was. County officials considered it disrespecting the Sabbath, an offense punishable with jail time. Sturdevant may not have known the law or he might have ignored it. Whatever the case, he landed in jail with bail set too high to get out.⁵

When the Sturdevants settled in Tennessee, only 555 Adventists lived in the Southern states, making up the Church’s two administrative units: the Tennessee River Conference and the Cumberland Mission. With no formal training, Sturdevant and his wife began work at a school founded and directed by self-supporting Adventist minister George W. Colcord. In March 1893, the General Conference voted to support the school that would become Graysville Academy, but most of its financing fell on Adventist laypeople living in Central Tennessee.⁶ Amid a devastating economic depression, the General Conference could not afford to give much more than moral support.

On the Sunday of Sturdevant’s arrest, the school director and eight teachers landed in jail. The school closed indefinitely. The arrests may have specifically targeted the Adventists in Graysville. Records suggest residents knew the officials enforced the law selectively. Hundreds of Graysville residents worked Sundays in the Dayton Coal and Iron Company in nearby Dayton, Tennessee. They continued working Sunday after Sunday while Sturdevant remained in jail.⁷

After serving his time, Sturdevant moved the family from Graysville to Birmingham, Alabama, where he grew acquainted with the work of the Adventists in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Accounts in Edson White’s Gospel Herald guided Sturdevant’s service in Alabama.⁸

In Birmingham the Sturdevant family worked in the African American community.⁹ The largest city in Alabama, Birmingham attracted hundreds of poor Whites and Blacks into its mines and foundries. For most of the nineteenth century, Mobile, a city of forty thousand, had been Alabama’s most prominent urban area. But after the American Civil War, Birmingham burst onto the landscape due to its plentiful iron ore. Named after the industrial city of Birmingham in England and incorporated in 1871, Birmingham’s rapid land and population growth earned it the nickname “the Magic City.” In 1880, 3,086 lived there. By 1890, the population exploded to 26,178.

When the Sturdevants arrived in 1895, Birmingham

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⁵ Melvin C. Sturdevant (sitting), V. Wilson (standing) with Solusi peanut crop. Photo courtesy of the Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists/General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.
added new industries almost daily. Two years after they settled there, the city counted two hundred industrial plants that primarily employed African Americans, many of them formerly enslaved people or their children who had abandoned Southern cotton fields. By 1920, Birmingham had become the most important industrial city in the South with a population of over 180,000.

In 1895, the General Conference granted Melvin Sturdevant a missionary license. The family gravitated toward the horrendous poverty in the city. Low wages, high rents, and the price of food set by company stores forced Birmingham’s miners and oven workers to toil long, grueling hours. Many workers arrived as prisoners, leased to the foundries by local, county, and federal prisons. Long working hours and high accident rates engendered deprivation and hunger. Segregation made life more difficult still. Black people lived in the Black section of town. They went to Black churches, sent their children to Black schools, and were buried in Black cemeteries.

Sturdevant began giving Bible readings in his home. Most Southern White people never ventured into Black communities. Although they considered African Americans good workers, they did not see them as good citizens. But on Bible reading nights, African American families crowded the Sturdevant home—at times over thirty workers and family members came to hear the presentations.

In the summer of 1895, General Conference President O. A. Olsen visited the Sturdevant home and participated in one of the meetings. White Southerners considered helping Blacks a waste of time. However, Sturdevant worked among Whites and Blacks alike. The work of Sturdevant and several Black and White families led to the first Adventist Church in Birmingham.

By the end of 1898, an integrated Adventist school opened in Alabama largely because of the Sturdevant family’s work. That December, Melvin Sturdevant reported to the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*:
The school work increased till it became necessary to secure another teacher; and now the burden has been rolled upon us to start a rescue home mission in the slums of our City. Accordingly, we have rented a building, and today it stands empty, waiting for money to fit it up. This we believe will be done soon; we want to open it on Christmas day.

The police tell me there are ten colored men in this City without food and shelter to one white man. The colored population here numbers from twenty to twenty-five thousand. We are greatly in need of money and clothing to help men, women, and children. 

In 1901, the Sturdevants, who had lost their son to illness in Birmingham, moved to Atlanta, Georgia, hoping to replicate their earlier work. Birmingham, Atlanta, and the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta all presented similar challenges. Located in the American Black Belt, the three areas were home to the majority of African Americans in the Deep South. After the Civil War, many Black Americans moved out of the country into large cities like Birmingham and Atlanta.

Writing from Atlanta, Sturdevant reported: “We hope soon to start a night school for the grown people, and a day school for the children, for the public schools are so overcrowded that hundreds cannot attend. There is an abundance of work to be done here, and we are of good courage.”

Atlanta’s burgeoning Black community made the city attractive to people leaving rural Georgia and to Blacks from neighboring states. Population growth allowed the founding of two African American banks in 1888 that served Atlanta’s Black-owned retail stores, grocery stores, cemeteries, and realty associations. Besides its healthy business community, the city also saw the birth of the Atlanta University Center with five institutions of higher learning for African Americans.

During the Sturdevants’ time in Atlanta, more and more Blacks entered the middle class. Whites felt threatened by their presence. From 1890 to 1900, Georgia had the second-highest number of lynchings in the United States. During those ten years, three thousand men and women lost their lives to lynchings. The White population’s inability to reconcile their Black neighbors’ prosperity undoubtedly accounted for much of the violence. Atlanta became prosperous but also
dangerous. In that tense environment, the Sturdevants found an eager population looking for betterment and opportunity.

Tensions between the White population and the growing Black community exploded in 1906 with the Atlanta Race Riot. But by then the Sturdevants had left Atlanta and the United States.

In 1902, at the request of the Adventist Church’s Foreign Mission Board, the Sturdevants moved again, this time to Africa. They visited family and friends in Illinois and passed by Battle Creek on their way to the Solusi Mission in Matabeleland, Southern Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe). The government had given the Adventist Church several hundred acres of land in the continent’s interior, where they founded Solusi Mission in 1894. The school had suffered ethnic warfare, illness, and high staff turnover. Solusi’s workers had fled to the nearby city of Bulawayo from 1896 to 1897, abandoning the mission because of military conflict. In February 1898, an epidemic broke out, killing several Adventist leaders and native people. The Americans who did not die had returned to the United States.

Sturdevant and his wife began work in Solusi in 1902. Three years later, the following report appeared in the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald:

The Lord has blessed Brother and Sister Sturdevant in their labors at this place. They now have fifty-four boys and girls in the mission home, and many more are knocking for admittance, but our funds will not permit us to receive others at present. A real interest is being awakened among the natives in some sections by our native teachers as they labor among the people.

A picture of the newly dedicated church at the Solusi Mission appeared in the Advent Review. Interestingly, the church in Solusi was almost identical in size and architecture to the school founded by the Morning Star Mission in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1895. The influence of Sturdevant and his wife appeared not only in the architecture but also in many other elements of the school, including a waiting list of students who wanted admittance. In a 1906 report, W. S. Hyatt called the mission’s financial condition its best in many years. The mission planted and sold three hundred and fifty bags of corn at one pound a bag, not counting food the students grew in the mission gardens. This pushed Solusi steadily toward financial independence and toward planting new schools.

By 1907, the Sturdevants and their associates prompted Church leaders in South Africa to consider establishing a manual training school at a higher
educational level. General Conference President G. A. Irwin wrote in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*:

In the minds of the brethren the time has fully come when an advanced school must be established at the Solusi Mission, to give not only the older and more advanced boys of that station a more thorough Bible training but to take boys from the other stations who have come to the point where they are in need of similar help.

There are fifteen boys at the Solusi Mission ready to enter such a school.28

Since the 1890s, African Adventists had attempted to establish a college in their part of the world without success. When one church member found diamonds on his land, the influx of money allowed conference officials to build a brand-new college, sanitarium, and publishing house in Cape Town, South Africa. However, the college encountered the same problems that Battle Creek College in Michigan confronted in the 1890s. The South African college boasted a brand-new campus and professors but no students. Few African Adventist students, White or Black, had the schooling necessary for college work. The few who did usually went to Oxford, Cambridge, or other colleges in England. In the end, the college in Cape Town, lacking students, closed its doors.29

In several respects, South Africa paralleled the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Both functioned within the shadows of a caste system. Although the South African caste system had more layers, those at the bottom suffered similar poverty and discrimination to those in the Mississippi Delta. As in America, the Black community in South Africa was segregated and prevented access to education. As in the American South, keeping Blacks in their place had become a central goal of the dominant, White culture. The words of Cecil John Rhodes, the most powerful man in South Africa, speaking to the House of Assembly in Cape Town in 1887, reflect the kind of Africa the English Empire wanted:

These are my politics on the native affairs, and these are the politics of South Africa. . . . The native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise. . . . We must adopt a system of despotism, such as works so well in India, in our relations with the barbarians of South Africa.30

Rhodes worked painstakingly to attain apartheid when the English arrived in South Africa. Although the Solusi Mission in Matabeleland began in the early 1890s, it only began functioning in earnest during the early twentieth century when the Sturdevants arrived. In part, the Solusi Mission floundered before 1902 because early missionaries depended on resources from the United States. Those early workers struggled to cultivate the land or teach students to farm. As one-time farmers drawing on Booker T. Washington’s methodology, the Sturdevants understood the importance of agriculture and began cultivating the land.

By 1907, as part of their curriculum, students farmed two hundred acres, harvesting five or six crops every fall. That produce allowed the community to live healthier, employ students, finance education, and enrich surrounding villages.31

That year the Sturdevants uprooted again, leaving the Solusi Mission in trained hands and moving further into the continent’s interior to establish another mission. “And now we feel that we can no longer stay here at Solusi, for we greatly desire to push on into places not yet entered,” Sturdevant wrote in 1907.32 The Sturdevants

In several respects, South Africa paralleled the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Both functioned within the shadows of a caste system.
developed a clear plan. They looked for land to plant another manual training school. They wanted to recreate Solusi. The plan included what they called out-schools—primary feeder schools whose students would transfer to the mission school. In November 1907, Sturdevant reported to the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald:

The work is onward at Solusi. Three more young men were baptized last month. Our out-schools are doing quite well, rather better than last year. The home school is holding its own nicely. Our crops were extra good last year, but prices were very low, the country being full of grain. We are hoping for good crops again this season, as it has not dried out as usual this winter. May the Lord bless the dear workers at home.

In time, Solusi Mission, its teachers, students, and graduates established hundreds of manual training schools across Africa. The mission transformed into Solusi University. In a hundred years’ time, the manual training schools grew the Adventist Church by hundreds of thousands. The African Adventist Church outgrew the Church everywhere else. The Sturdevants worked in Africa planting schools for almost thirty-five years.

When Melvin fell ill in 1929, the Sturdevants returned to Illinois, but the manual training schools they birthed and the hundreds of students they mentored continued, producing teachers, nurses, doctors, and preachers.

Although many of those late nineteenth-century manual training schools eventually closed, some continue the work started by Melvin and Margaret Jane Sturdevant. The Sturdevants’ place in Adventist history accounts for much of Adventism’s appearing and flourishing throughout the African continent, one of the most vibrant parts of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church today.

ENDNOTES:
1. This school would become the forerunner of what in the twentieth century would become Southern Adventist University.
2. In 1897, Adventist education started a reform movement that transformed Adventist schools, which led to expansive growth.
7. See the first three chapters of Reiber, Graysville: Battle Creek of the South 1888-1988.
8. The Gospel Herald began publication in 1897 in the Mississippi Delta and reported on the work of several White and Black teachers who founded a handful of schools in Mississippi.
10. See the United States Census 1880, 1890, and 1900.
15. There is strong evidence that another Sturdevant worked in the Chicago City Mission in the early 1890s. It could have been his brother who also moved South at about the same time Melvin moved.
18. The term Black Belt generally referred to the portions of the Deep Southern states blessed with rich black soil ideal for growing cotton, the region of the states that imported Black slaves in the first half of the nineteenth century.
Chapter 1

“There is a multitude of fiction writers, luring to pleasant dreams in palaces of ease. These writers may not be open to the charge of immorality, yet their work is... fraught with evil.” -Ellen G. White, Education, p. 227

I’m probably not allowed to say, write, or think this—considering the damage it does to my chances of salvation—but I’ve always found the Sabbath to be unbearably boring. There, I said it. If that was too blasphemous for you, you should stop reading right now and toss whatever book or device you’re reading into a fire.

You’re still reading, so you’ve probably decided the fire doesn’t need kindling just yet. The rest of the book should be a bit less sacrilegious, but keep that fire going, just in case.

Now where was I? Ah yes. The Sabbath—one of the defining beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist church. It’s right there in the name. What could be more
fulfilling to the soul than resting, clearing the mind of worldly thought, and communing with God… unless you’re still a kid.

A God-fearing adult—firmly rooted in their faith; spiritually, mentally, and physically drained from a hard week of soul-crushing work—will welcome Sabbath. But your average kid? Meh, not so much.

Sabbath can be a cruel and unusual punishment. You’re woken up early and forced into itchy, restrictive clothes. Then you’re kidnapped and whisked off to the House of the Lord. Then you’re told to sit still for hours on end.

Any attempt to amuse oneself in the way God intended is answered with swift rebuke by a tired, irritable parent: “Stop running! Stop shouting! Stop trying to gouge your brother’s eyes out!” and what have you.

The place gets stuffy and hot; no matter the church, even in winter. You feel miserable and mischievous, but you have an adult on either side of you. It’s like a maximum-security prison. The preacher drones on, using words a child either doesn’t understand or has heard so many times it’s nauseating.

Even after all that’s over and you return to the comfort of your own home, you’re not allowed to do anything but talk to people and read books written in Old English.

If you, parents, think your child can come to enjoy this insufferable, socially accepted form of torture, I find it my responsibility to shatter any such illusions. They don’t want to be in another school setting for divine service. We want to run free.

If you happen to own—and I use the word “own” deliberately—one of those rare angels who will do as they are told without resistance, good for you. But otherwise, that girl or boy is going to do something “unacceptable” sooner or later, in front of the whole congregation. Don’t hold it against them.

Oh, and one further note. To the cheek pinchers and huggers out there, I beseech thee on behalf of kids everywhere: I don’t know who you are, I am not cute, and you can stop hugging me now.

Anyway, onto the story:

There I was, a 15-year-old girl completely out of her mind with boredom. Sabbath had only started an hour ago, and I was already going crazy.

All the church kids were in the empty baptismal pool, which served as our hideout—you know, that hangout place in the church where all the kids meet up. You never had that? Sucks to be you.

So we were lying around, wondering what we were going to do for the next 23 hours. There were five of us: My little brother, Samuel Grey, the bright-eyed 7-year-old. Me, Jannah Grey, the pessimist. Laura McGill, the beautiful, 16-year-old bully and the wild 13-year-old Naomi McGill—the pastor’s two daughters. And Norman Myers, the tall, mild-mannered 17-year-old. This was the crew, the kids on the block, the brothers and sisters from different mothers and misters.

We also happened to be the only kids within a fifty-mile radius.

The year was 1992, back when Madonna and Michael Jackson were at the top of the charts, Michael Jordan was in his prime, and the Cold War was still fresh in our minds. MTV was a way of life and L.A. was on fire. There was no Netflix, no YouTube, no social media, no smartphones. I kept forgetting that Germany was a single country, and that the USSR wasn’t a thing anymore. And, most importantly, that abomination
VeggieTales hadn’t hit the shelves yet.

“How about we go fishing at the creek?” suggested Norman. We grimaced.

“Again?” I asked.

Naomi pouted. “I can’t stand fishing. It’s so… fishy. And boring.”

“And isn’t it, like, deerfly season? We’d get eaten alive,” said Laura.

“Oh. Right.”

“We can go swimming at the lake,” said Samuel.

“Naw, we did that two weeks ago,” said Norman.

I should note that “swimming,” to us, meant wading knee-deep. None of us knew how to actually swim.

“So what are we going to do? This is one of our last weeks together.”

“Die of boredom,” I said, flopping my languid body over the cold concrete.

“We could set the church on fire,” said Naomi with a wicked grin. She flickered a lighter near her face and it was hard to tell if she was joking or not.

“We could have a picnic,” said Laura.

“We could start a bonfire,” said Naomi. “A big, like, crazy fire.” We were all frightened for Naomi’s well-being. That poor, poor, brain-damaged child.

“We could—”

“Wait! You hear that?”

The noise in question was the clopping of adult footsteps outside the sanctuary. We grabbed our hymnals, and Norman conducted.

“For there’s no other way! To be happy in Jesus! But to trust and obey!” we sang in unison, as though finishing the whole song.

Pastor Roger F. McGill, a stalwart white man with a distinguishing mustache and kind, dark eyes, strolled into the sanctuary. He held a Bible in one hand, and a stack of sermon notes in the other.

“Hey!” he said smiling. “What did I tell you kids about hanging out in the sanctuary?”

“Where else are we supposed to hang out?”

“Outside?” said Pastor. “It’s a beautiful evening.”

“It’s deerfly season,” someone muttered. That

Author Nolan Ryan advertises his new book, and reasons why he wrote it, on social media.

canoe unsupervised and with no experience whatsoever over open water to a desolate island with the word ‘cemetery’ in its name?”

They stared me down disapprovingly. It’s hard being the voice of reason sometimes.

“We can say it’s a Pathfinder trip,” said Norman, the Pathfinder leader.

“We could have a picnic,” said Laura.

“We could start a bonfire,” said Naomi. “A huge, like, crazy fire.” We were all frightened for Naomi’s well-being. That poor, poor, brain-damaged child.

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“Where else are we supposed to hang out?”

“Outside?” said Pastor. “It’s a beautiful evening.”

“It’s deerfly season,” someone muttered. That
particular individual took a nasty elbow to the stomach. Deerflies at night?

“Dad, we just wanted to sing a few hymns in God’s house,” said Laura, always quick with an answer.

“Uh-huh. From inside the baptismal pool… “

“It’s… cooler in here?”

“It’s at ground level.”

“The acoustics are better.”

“Yeah, nice try. You kids have no respe—” but he stopped himself, knowing well that arguing with kids is like arguing with a brick wall. “Hm, actually it’s a good thing you guys are here. You can listen to my sermon for tomorrow. You know, give me some pointers.”

“Um, well, we were just leaving…”

“Yeah, we have this Pathfinder thing to go plan…”

“Outdoors, fresh air.”

He laughed as we slinked out of the sanctuary, having been sorely outwitted.

“Why does he have to be so nice?” I mumbled as we sat on the church porch. “It’s because of men like him that our church looks like a cult. And those hymn lyrics aren’t helping.”

Chapter 2

“The youth have an inborn love of liberty; they desire freedom.” -Ellen G. White, Education, p. 291

The next morning came with age-old Sabbath drowsiness. Even though we were all awake and running out of time, we waited sleepily in our beds until it was absolutely necessary to get up. Then, at that critical moment, all chaos broke loose.

There was a volley of shouting and screaming, a mad rush for the bathroom.

A race to shower, brush teeth, comb hair, choose and iron clothes.

A chaotic scramble for breakfast and Bibles and wallets and purses and stockings and ties and a final clambering up and down the stairs to grab forgotten car keys.

We were all in the car in less than ten minutes, and Mom pushed our tiny, rusty old minivan as fast as it would go, spewing dirt and dust behind us.

Our best record, seventeen miles from beds to sanctuary, was ten minutes and thirty-four seconds. That was a day to remember.

We were the last people in, as usual. The hundred or so other members of Tin County Adventist Church seemed to always be on time. Most were retired, after all. My family, on the other hand, rarely ever made it in time for Sabbath School.

My parents, you see, never had enough time in the week to sleep. They had 4 and a half jobs between them and had two weird children to raise (yes, we were weird and proud of it). Friday night was the only chance they got for more than three hours of continuous sleep, and they took it religiously.

Even though it must have been the two or three thousandth time we were late, everyone found it necessary to stop listening to the sermon and stare at us. It was the mandatory weekly shaming of the weirdos. Laura, in the front pew, snickered as usual. I stuck my tongue out at her.

I pulled at my dress—the one I had outgrown three years over. The one that made me “look fat.” The dress wasn’t helping with the sweltering, July heat. The ancient ceiling fans spun at the lowest setting. All the windows were closed, and the air was stuffy and stale. It was going to be a long day.
We sat in our pew, and almost immediately Dad fell asleep. He slept soundly and soundlessly, with plenty of drool dribbling from his mouth.

Mom was too tired to remember to elbow him every few minutes. She nodded away, completely exhausted from mopping floors and unclogging toilets.

We kids, of course, were not about to help. We reveled in our parents’ embarrassment. When we weren’t fighting each other, we were making our parents look bad.

In fact, Sam brought a pack of raisins to church with him and was throwing them one by one into Dad’s open mouth. I watched, tittering, waiting patiently for the inevitable mayhem.

“…and to love one another is to love God himself. ‘As you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me!’”

“Amen!”

“Amen Brother!” Eight raisins so far.

“When you see a person in need, it doesn’t matter who they are, how rich they are, what skin color they are, how tall they are, or how they treat yah, they are a child of God!”

“Preach it Brother McGill!”

“Amen!”

Twelve raisins and counting.

“If I can help somebody as I pass along,” he said, starting to sing. He really couldn’t sing to save his life, being one hundred percent tone-deaf. “If I can help somebody as I pass along, then my living shall not be in vain! Can I get an amen?”

“Amen!”

“Amen!”

Aw man, this sermon’s lame. Recycled beyond repair. Completely unoriginal. No real substance.

Then old Mrs. O’Reilly started playing the organ, and the whole congregation stood—except for my father. It gave my brother time to pop a nineteenth and twentieth raisin into his mouth. He was an impeccable shot.

Then, the deluge.

My dad gave a loud snore. He jerked upright—panic in his eyes—and coughed violently. The cough sent the raisins flying across the sanctuary.

The furthest raisin traveled from my dad’s mouth in the back pew to the pulpit. The other nineteen raisins spread everywhere in between; down people’s clothes; down the organ pipes; into people’s wigs and toupees.

The singing tapered off, then the organ stopped, then the pastor stopped dictating. All they could do was stare quietly, in complete awe of our audacity. The only sounds left were of Samuel and me killing ourselves with laughter.

That moment was worth any number of belt lashes, and there would be many. Our family had secured its position as the church pariahs, and I liked it that way... sometimes.

Later that day, after potluck and a lengthy appointment with Dad’s belt, the gang was back in the baptismal pool planning the great escapade. We came with a change of clothes, maps, rope, some money we managed to scrape together, walkie-talkies, insect repellent, a first aid kit, a picnic basket, bear mace, matches, small explosives, etc.

It was nice to be prepared for once, but I thought that it would be hard to explain all the gear if we were stopped by the police or, worse yet, a parent.

You see, we never actually got around to asking for permission.

“What’s for dinner anyway?” I asked. “Mayonnaise sandwiches,” said Laura, who was in charge of the food.

“What?”

“What?”

“What? You guys don’t like mayonnaise sandwiches?”

“You just put mayonnaise between two pieces of bread?”

“Yeah. What’s the problem?”

“That’s nasty,” I said.

“Disgusting,” said Naomi.

“Is there anything else?”
Laura shrugged. “Some fruit?”

“Great. Now we have nothing to eat.”

“Norman, you just ate.”

“So? I’m still hungry. Imma growin’ boy. Besides, there’s never anything good at potluck.”

“Stupid veggie casserole. Stupid veggie lasagna. Stupid Special K loaf.”

“What time is it?” asked Laura.

“Three forty-five.”

“Time to hit the road, let’s bounce.” “Should we pray first?”

“Eh, why not.”

Sam, our designated prayer leader, made it short. “Lord, please don’t let us get caught by our parents, who would undoubtedly beat us senseless. Please don’t let us get caught by the cops, who would send a little black kid like me to rot in jail without any provocation other than sneaking suspiciously around the woods with explosives. Please help us not drown. Please help us to not die from Naomi’s fireworks or Norman’s awful navigational skills, or from Jannah’s lecturing, or from Laura’s terrible cooking. Forgive us of our transgressions, and thank You for this day, which You have blessed, in Jesus’ name, amen.”

“Amen.”

“Everyone remember,” said Laura, “stick to the plan, stay off major roads.”

Norman nodded. “The rally point is Omega, east of the beach.”

We split into two teams. Team B, Samuel, Naomi, and I, would take all the gear to the shore. Team A, Norman and Laura, would do the heavy lifting: go into town, rent the canoes, and carry them down to us.

It was important that we stayed separate so that if one team was caught, only half of the entire group would be punished.

My team made it to the shore and didn’t have much to do but swat away the flies, skip stones and wait for team A to arrive. At 4:15, Laura radioed in with a flourish of static.

“Bravo come in, this is Alpha, over.”

“Breaker Alpha! We’re taking heavy fire from the beach! We’re pinned down and requesting an aerial strike! I say again! We’re—”

“Give me that!” I said, grabbing the radio from Naomi.

“Alpha, this is Bravo, over.”

“Bravo, we have a complication. Mr. Zino raised the prices. He’s charging extra for lifejackets, so we don’t have enough. Should we just go without them? Alpha.”

“Alpha, if we go out on that water without lifejackets and one of us goes overboard, I guarantee you someone will die. Ask Mr. Zino to take it out of Norman’s pay. Over.”

I could imagine Norman protesting on the other side of the static.

“Bravo, Alpha is en route with the goods. I say again, en route. ETA, sixteen-hundred thirty hours. Acknowledge.”

“Alpha, on route with goods, ETA sixteen hundred thirty. Bravo out.”

At precisely four-thirty, two tiny, red, aluminum canoes made their way down the forested hillside to our secret meeting place. Norman and Laura were running wildly, swarmed by a thick cloud of bloodsucking flies.

“We did it,” said Norman, panting and dropping his canoe. “It cost me half-a week’s salary, and probably a pint of blood, but we did it.”

Laura was visibly upset. “It was awful, so many flies. They just kept on, like, coming at me.”
“Keep it together, soldier!” shrieked Naomi. “Hanoi isn’t going to take herself!”

“Seriously,” said Laura. “Who in their right mind let Naomi watch Full Metal Jacket?”

“I think it was Norman,” someone said.

“Boooo! Boo Norman.”

“Stupid Norman.”

“What were you thinking Norman?”

“Yeah Norman, stupid.”

“That’s it. The next time you wanna deduct something from my pay, you can forget it.”

We put on the lifejackets, loaded our supplies, and pushed off. We paddled without a care in the world. It was a sunny day. The water of Lake Superior was cool, with calm, deep blue ripples.

Within half a thought, we were out of sight of the shore. A thought after that, we were completely lost. We maneuvered the boats to float side by side to regroup and get our bearings.

“Okay, who has the map?” asked Laura. “That would be Norman,” said I. “Norman?”

“Um… right. Map,” he said, reaching into his back pocket. He pulled out a soggy mass of colored paper. “Oh. Umm… I guess it was in my pocket when I was…”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “But we have a compass, right? Who has that?”

“Norman again.”

“Compass?” he asked. “Oh man, I must have forgotten it at home.”

“Come on Norman,” said Naomi. “You’re supposed to be our leader.”

“So we’re completely lost?” asked Laura. “Umm… I think so,” said Norman. “Does anyone remember which direction the shore’s in?”

I rolled my eyes. “The shore’s south, so back home is left of the sun because it’s in the west. The island is to the northeast, so it should be somewhere thataway.”

I pointed the way.

“Thank goodness for nerds,” said Naomi. “Hey!”

“But how long is this supposed to take?” asked Samuel, groaning impatiently.

“Let’s just keep going for another hour,” said Norman.

“If we don’t find the island by then, we turn back.”


“Shut up, soldier!” shouted Naomi. “You don’t know the meaning of the word hurt!”

“Let’s get going. We’re running out of time here.”

“Row! Row! Row! Row!” shouted Naomi. “I said row maggots!”

Half an hour later, the green, uninhabited island came into view. It was a mound of pine and sand sticking up out of a vast expanse of blue.

“And Row! Row! Row!”

“Please. Naomi. Stop,” I said for the hundredth time.

“Please.”

“This is it, boys, Normandy. Keep your heads down, and you’ll all make it home in time for Christmas.”

“Laura,” I said, rubbing my temples. “Get your crazy sister to shut up.”

“That would require a bribe,” said Laura.

“And I am currently devoid of any candy, cash, or VHS tapes.”

“Does anyone have any of those things?” I asked. “Some pocket change maybe?”

“I know!” said Samuel. “We can deduct it from Norman’s pay!”

“Yeah, great idea,” Norman muttered bitterly.

We landed and stormed the beach, dragging the canoes ashore. Naomi took the lead, shooting imaginary defenders with her paddle.

The island was pretty small—less than a few hundred yards wide—and densely forested. The trees were much bigger and taller than the ones around town. The island was left nearly untouched since it was a fishing post three centuries ago.

“Pathfinders, fall in!” Norman commanded. It caught us off guard, and we hesitated. Maybe he was joking.

“Now!”

I sighed. Guess not.

We lined up from shortest to tallest in our lifejackets at attention. We glanced at each other, wondering what on Earth was going on.

Norm spoke like a drill sergeant, but we knew it was
just big talk. You see, Norman was—in a word—a wimp. “For the next 168 hours, you grubs are under my strict rule!”

“And mine,” said Pastor McGill, stepping out from the treeline. In addition to being both head and youth pastor, he was also our club director. It was weird seeing him dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.


The boat was the McGills’ personal “pleasure craft.” It was really just a small fishing boat—you know, those cheap aluminum ones—but to me it might as well have been a luxury yacht. I doubted my folks could have even afforded a canoe. Maybe if we skipped a few meals...

“What’s this all about?” asked Laura.

Norman grinned, his braces glinting in the glow of the setting sun. “Welcome to the end of the world!”

I groaned, knowing exactly how this was going to end; with Naomi setting the island on fire.

“Over the next week,” Norman said, with that high-pitched drill instructor voice of his, “you Pathfinders are going to prepare for the end times!”

“I was wrong,” I mumbled. “This is what makes us look like a cult.”

“You will learn how to survive in the wilderness with nothing but a tent, a blanket, and the clothes on your back!”

“No, really, what’s going on?” asked Samuel. “I thought we were just pretending to go on a Pathfinder trip.”

Norman sighed. “Long story short, your parents all signed permission forms for a wilderness survival course behind your backs. It had to be a surprise to feel like the actual end times.”

“Wilderness?” asked Laura. “I’m not going to get dirty, am I?”

“Norman!” Naomi gasped. “You went to our parents behind our backs! That breaks the church kid code!”

“There’s a code?” asked Norman.

“Nope,” said Naomi. “I’m just messing.”

“Pastor Mac?” asked Sam, dancing urgently and raising a hand.

“Yes Sam?”

“I really need to go to the bathroom.”

“Here.” Norman took a small gardening spade out of his backpack and handed it to my brother. “You’re going to need this.”

“Seriously,” said Laura. “I’m not going to get dirty, right? I’m wearing, like, really good clothes.”

“Let’s start a fire!”

I shook my head. “This is not going to end well.”

Five days later, when we finally returned from that nightmarish trip, Dad picked us up at the dock. It was seven in the evening, and the sun was setting.

All the other kids were already gone—picked up hours ago—but Dad, with his two jobs and chronic lateness, left us waiting a considerable while longer. We were grimy, wet, stinky, worn, and miserable. The trip had been an utter disaster. That’s what you get for putting Norman in charge of anything. And for bringing Naomi along.

Dad adjusted the rearview mirror. “So, Sam, how’d it go?”

All Sam could do was give him a look of complete discombobulation. The rain, the mud, the latrine pit incident, the raccoon raids, the horrible singing, the constant whining, the Loma Linda brand food, and, of course, the fire—it was enough to break anyone.

“Jannah?” asked Dad. “Well? How was it?”

“How was it? How did it go!” I shouted. I pointed at the trickle of smoke on the horizon. “Dad! We literally set the island on fire! How do you think it went?”

“Better than work,” he muttered.
As of the fall of 2023, Andrews University Press offers two introductory college textbooks on theology: Richard Rice’s *Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective*, 2nd ed.,¹ and John C. Peckham’s *God with Us: An Introduction to Adventist Theology*. In this article I will comparatively describe these two volumes, comprehensively consider two topics they each cover, and correspondingly provide some observations and comments.

**T. Richard Rice**
When Rice wrote the second edition of *Reign of God*, he was professor of theology in the School of Religion at Loma Linda University. Having retired in 2020, Rice is professor emeritus at Loma Linda University. He received a Bachelor of Arts from La Sierra College, a Master of Divinity from Andrews University, and a Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy in Christian theology from the University of Chicago. Rice is the author of many books and articles.

**John C. Peckham**
Peckham is research professor of theology and Christian philosophy at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. He is also an associate editor of the *Adventist Review*. He earned a Bachelor of Science from Atlantic Union College and Master of Divinity and Doctor of Philosophy from Andrews University. He is also a prolific author.

*Warren C. Trenchard (PhD Chicago) is professor emeritus of New Testament and early Christian literature, and director of graduate programs in the H. M. S. Richards Divinity School of La Sierra University.*
Rice’s book, published in 1997, is the 423-page, second edition of a similarly titled first edition\(^2\) that appeared in 1985—both published by Andrews University Press. The book includes a table of contents, prefaces to the first and second editions, a list of abbreviations, and a subject index following sixteen chapters.\(^3\) Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

The chapters of the second edition each contain an untitled page of biblical quotations and references pertaining to the topic, a doctrinal discussion in two columns with headings and subheadings, study helps that include questions for review, questions for further study, suggestions for Bible study, and annotated suggestions for further reading from Adventist writers and others. Each concludes with notes for the chapter.\(^4\)

Peckham’s volume, published in 2023, consists of 768 pages. The book has a table of contents, foreword, preface, acknowledgments, introduction, a list of competing theories in Christian theology, nineteen chapters in five parts,\(^5\) an epilogue, the full text of the Adventist fundamental beliefs, and densely packed endnotes for the whole book. There are no indices. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

Each chapter contains the doctrinal discussion in one column with headings and subheadings, occasionally inserted competing theories in Christian theology relevant to the topic, a “Conclusion: Why does it matter?” section, questions for reflection, and unannotated suggestions for further reading from Adventist writers and others.

Given time and space limitations, it is not possible for me to review and comment on all the chapters and themes found in these two books. Instead, I will examine two topics that both authors address. The first is the trinity—part of the doctrine of God. I selected this theme, in part, because each author is especially known for his published views on the doctrine of God.\(^6\) The second theme is Sabbath. I selected this because each author has identified Adventist theology as the context for his exploration of Christian theology\(^7\) and because Sabbath is central to Adventism.
Doctrine of the Trinity

Rice does not have a complete chapter on the trinity but covers it in chapter three, “God’s Character: The Basis of His Reign,” in the section “The Trinity: Love as the Inner Being of God.” Although he starts the chapter with relevant quoted and referenced biblical texts, he does not include any that pertain specifically to the trinity.

Rice begins his discussion of the trinity by declaring, “For many people, the idea of the trinity is the most baffling aspect of the Christian doctrine of God . . . [It’s] a mathematical absurdity” (58). However, looking for analogies like triangles or the three states of water misses the mark. The trinity is not a puzzle to be solved but the basis of God’s saving acts, especially his gifts of the Son and the Spirit. Portrayals of God in the Son and Jesus in the Spirit reveal that God is not only one but also experiences distinctions, i.e., God can be physically absent but personally present.

He contends that, if love is God’s essence, it follows that God has eternally required an object of love, even if it is within himself. In other words, God must always have had a plural dimension. Because Rice realizes this may seem “confusing,” he offers to simplify things (58). He declares that God merely reveals himself to be what he is, i.e., Father, Son, and Spirit.

Rice points to two states of development among early Christians: (1) Jesus’s first followers experienced God in him. To them, “He was God” (59), but, because they were monotheists, they did not think of him as distinct from God, i.e., another God. “They experienced God in Jesus, not God and Jesus” (59). (2) After Jesus physically left his followers, they continued to experience him through the presence of the Spirit.

Having argued for what amounts to a plural dimension to God, Rice returns to the trinity by asking, “But is the doctrine of the trinity truly biblical” (60)? He notes that, while the word “trinity” is not found or discussed in the Bible, it is implied. There are “hints” in the Old Testament and “preliminary expressions” in the New Testament—suggesting “a complexity within God” (60).

For specific Christian considerations of the trinity, Rice points to the fourth and fifth centuries, where “two heretical tendencies—an overemphasis on divine unity and an overemphasis on divine complexity” (60)—bracketed the debates. The first focused on the oneness of God with various modes of expression; the second focused on whether Jesus was fully and eternally God. What emerged was the understanding of God as “one substance” in “three persons”—unity yet distinction (60). He sees the Latin idea of “person” used here not in the modern idea of independence but in the sense of distinct characteristics—not mere functional differences.

Rice concludes this discussion by noting some contemporary reflections on the trinity that view it as rooted in the saving acts of God, revealing who he really is. He also returns to the topic in his chapter conclusion by summarily describing God as follows: “His inner reality is a complex of relationships, not sheer undifferentiated unity” (71).

Like most of his chapters, Rice includes suggestions for further reading. The Adventist writers on the doctrine of God include A. Graham Maxwell and Alden Thompson; other writers on the trinity include Karl Rahner, David Brown, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, and Jürgen Moltmann.

Peckham’s discussion of the trinity is much longer than Rice’s. He devotes his entire chapter six, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: The trinity of Love,” to the topic and organizes it with headings and subheadings. Although Peckham has no formal introduction to the chapter with biblical texts—quoted or referenced—he launches into the theme by describing the presence of the trinity at the baptism of Jesus: Father speaks, Son is baptized, and Spirit descends. In these introductory remarks, Peckham indicates that the Bible—although not ever using the word “trinity”—
declares that there is one God but also mentions Father, Son, and Spirit as God. He then asks a series of questions. How can this be? Is the trinity biblical? More specifically, (1) “Is the core trinity doctrine biblically warranted?” and (2) “Is the core trinity doctrine coherent?” (166).

After his introductory remarks, Peckham repeats the essence of his chapter title in the first heading, “The Story of the Father, Son, and Spirit—the trinity of Love.” He explores the story as he sees it develop in the experience of Jesus, focusing (1) on Jesus’s willing subordination to the Father in the Garden event and subsequent events of his execution and (2) on his embrace of the Spirit’s role in his ministry and beyond.

Peckham opens his next section, “The Core Trinity Doctrine,” by stating, “The story of the trinity is the story of love”—love in the saving acts of the Father, Son, and Spirit (172). This makes sense only if all three are God. The core doctrine maintains that there is only one God and that God is three distinct, divine persons. This consists of four tenets: (1) the oneness of God, (2) the threeness of God, (3) the full divinity of each, (4) the distinctiveness of each.

Strangely, before Peckham explores each of the four items above, he inserts another main section, “Competing Theories in Christian Theology: The Trinity.” Here he explores several ancient and modern views of the trinity he considers to be heretical, including “tritheism,” “modalism,” and “subordinationism” (173). He notes that some Adventists hold to various forms of the last “heresy.”

Peckham then explores his four tenets of the core trinity doctrine, starting with “Scripture Teaches There Is Only One God,” where he discusses several Old Testament and New Testament texts and references many others in support of this position. In the second, “Scripture Refers to a Trio of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” he claims that the Old Testament reflects the plurality of God in numerous texts, and at least seventy-five New Testament texts refer to the trinity within a span of one to five verses. In considering the third tenet, “Scripture Teaches That the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit Are (Fully) Divine,” he asserts that an entity is either fully divine or not divine at all. He claims that the Bible affirms that Jesus is God—indirectly in the Old Testament, directly in the New Testament. Likewise, he asserts that Scripture teaches the divinity of the Spirit. Finally, in “Scripture Teaches That the Father, Son, and Spirit Are Distinct Persons”—tenet four—Peckham acknowledges that, while most take Father and Son to be persons, not all see the Spirit that way. He understands “person” as one with “personal attributes” (178) and claims to find many biblical references that support this understanding of the Spirit.

Through these tenets, Peckham asserts, in the words of the next subheading, that “The Core Trinity Doctrine Is Biblically Warranted.” The fact that Paul declared that there is only one God and one Lord does not, according to Peckham, nullify the trinity.

Peckham moves into the section, “Understanding the Trinity,” with the question, “How can three persons be one? This leads him to ask, in the words of the subsection, “Is the Core Trinity Doctrine Coherent?” With a partial answer he offers the example of the three-leaf clover but not as proof. He simply declares that the biblical God is one in three persons. He further notes that Scripture does not tell us how this is possible but that “God somehow transcends creaturely limitations” (181).

The last section of the chapter before the conclusion is another unit on competing theories—a very long one: “Competing Theories in Christian Theology: Relations within the Trinity.” Here, Peckham discusses three competing theories that deal with internal trinity relations: (1) the claim that “eternal relations of origin within the trinity” are contrary to Scripture, a view held by “many Adventists” and others (182); (2) different ways that God is three and one—whether the trinity has a single, shared self-consciousness or an individual self-consciousness; (3) whether the Son and the Spirit are eternally or temporally/functionally subordinate to the Father, as some Adventists believe. Peckham concludes this chapter by summarizing his focus on love as the center of redemption through God as Father, Son, and Spirit. This seems like a homiletical call to those who want to be loved.
As in most of his chapters, Peckham includes suggestions for further reading. The Adventist sources include Daniel Bediako, Fernando Canale, Kwagan Donkor, Norman R. Gulley, Jerry Moon, Jiri Moskala, John C. Peckham, Paul Petersen, Woodrow Widden II, and Biblical Research Institute materials. Other writers suggested are Paul Copan, Gillies Emery, Millard J. Erickson, William Hasker, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Thomas H. McCall, Peter C. Phan, and Jason S. Sexton.

Comments

My first observation is that Rice’s treatment of the topic of the trinity is much shorter than Peckham’s—about three pages compared to about twenty-three pages! However, the former is considerably tighter and better organized than the latter. Nevertheless, both focus on the divine characteristic of “love” as central to understanding the trinity. The redemption of humans occurs as the God of love is manifest as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Contrasts in these two presentations of the trinity abound. Peckham acknowledges the logical challenges associated with the doctrine of the trinity; Rice forthrightly declares that, for many, the trinity is the most bewildering element of the doctrine of God. Rice considers the search for analogies for the trinity to be pointless; Peckham entertains examples like the three-leaf clover and the three states of water. Rice’s discussion of “person” is focused and succinct; Peckham is scattered and less precise. Peckham’s discussions of the Early Church debates on the trinity are rambling and unfocused; Rice treats the issues of the fourth and fifth centuries creatively, emphasizing their positive contributions. Rice’s arguments are usually measured but effective, generally using biblical materials sparingly but appropriately; Peckham’s arguments are sometimes baffling, and he quotes the Bible and refers to biblical texts exhaustively with much less precision and effectiveness. In contemplating the question of how the Father, Son and Spirit can be God and not be three gods, Peckham launches a strange discourse on what the meaning of the word “is” is.

The writers’ invitations for further reading in this chapter exhibit significant contrasts, as they do throughout the books. Rice, who lists only Adventist authors who wrote on the doctrine of God, offers the names of two major contributors to Adventist theological thinking, especially during the latter part of the twentieth century. In contrast, Peckham provides the names of nine Adventist authors, including himself—only one or two of whom would broadly be considered significant. Furthermore, Rice mentions several widely recognized and acclaimed non-Adventist authors; Peckham lists eight, and only two or three of them could be considered significant.


At the end of the introduction, Rice justifies this topic by asserting Sabbath is the climax of his theology and is related to other theological topics including the law, creation, and—for Adventists—the sign of the remnant. Although Adventists constitute the largest and best-known advocates of the seventh-day Sabbath, they are not alone, nor were they the first to adopt it by the middle of the nineteenth century. Rice explores the latter in the subsection “Sabbath in Adventist history,” noting that Seventh-day Adventists acquired the doctrine and
practice from Seventh Day Baptists but added the notion of an end-time group of Sabbath keepers—seen as a mark of the remnant Church. In the next subsection, “Sabbath today,” he notes that since the mid 1960s, Adventists have begun to focus on wider aspects of Sabbath that relate to Christian faith and life in general. Accordingly, Rice declares, “Properly understood, the sabbath is the capstone of Adventist theology and potentially its most valuable contribution to the larger Christian world” (393).

Rice’s next section is “From sabbath to Sunday,” where he first explores “How the change occurred.” He notes that, despite the lack of biblical evidence, most Christians today worship on Sunday. Why this is the case “is one of the most complicated problems in early Christian history” (399). Justified as honoring Jesus’s resurrection and the start of creation, change was gradual, starting by the mid-second century and becoming well-established by the fourth. However, concurrent Sabbath keeping continued until the fifth century. As for “What the change means,” Rice holds that Adventists, who see this change as having no biblical support, “consider Sunday observance as a departure from the apostolic faith of the church” (401) and understand it as part of an even larger pattern of apostate teachings and practices, as anticipated by the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. Furthermore, they see their role as a continuation of the Reformation. Accordingly, Adventists believe that Sabbath observance will be the seal of God in the end time, with Sunday keeping as the mark of the beast. For Rice, the latter “is perhaps the darkest, least attractive aspect of Adventist theology” (402). He recommends that to counter this, Adventists should (1) portray Sabbath as God’s universal gift, (2) avoid legalistic Sabbath keeping, and (3) recognize that the “mark of the beast” is still a future phenomenon.

The largest section in this chapter deals with “The Meaning of the Sabbath.” Understandably, with the reference to “Seventh-day” in their name, Adventists often see this as a mark of distinction. However, the real meaning of Sabbath should be understood in terms of all the major elements of Christian faith, as explored in the rest of this chapter.

These include: (1) “The sabbath and God”: The Sabbath shows God to be sovereign, both distinct from the world and close to it—present in time. God is a personal being with relationships. (2) “The sabbath and creation”: The created “world is finite and contingent” (404). While not divine, it is good and valuable. God exists in time. (3) “The sabbath and human life”: Sabbath celebrates freedom for all, including slaves and animals— freedom for and from. It has social implications and fosters responsibility for nature and the
environment. (4) “The sabbath and salvation”: Sabbath celebrates God’s saving activities. Like salvation, Sabbath is God’s gift. (5) “The sabbath and the church”: Like Sabbath, the Christian community (church) is God’s creation, providing a time for fellowship and worship, among other things. (6) “The sabbath and the future”: Adventists believe that Sabbath observance will be a final test in the end time. They hold that the present is incomplete and temporary, that Sabbath is a foretaste of future reward, and that it will continue in eternity.

As he typically does in his chapters, Rice includes a section that ties the topic to the reign of God: “The sabbath and the reign of God.” He has this appropriate, culminating statement: “The sabbath is the most vivid manifestation we have of the reign of God” (410). God reigns by serving and reconciling through Jesus in the context of the Church. “The sabbath, then, celebrates the reign of God in all its aspects. And the importance of the sabbath to Adventist life and thought is one reason for taking God’s reign as the guiding theme of Adventist theology” (411).

Rice concludes his discussion of Sabbath and the book with “The Sabbath Experience.” He claims that understanding Sabbath and experiencing it are related. Experiencing Sabbath involves “The challenge of sabbath keeping” and “The opportunity of sabbath keeping.” Regarding the former, he notes that in our society, times, places, and words may be sacred, but weekends are typically for leisure. He also asserts that Sabbath is more than giving up things. Concerning the latter, Rice shares what he considers to be the basic principle of Sabbath keeping: “Think of the sabbath in positive, rather than negative, terms . . . a glorious opportunity, not a tedious obligation” (412).


Like Rice, Peckham devotes a full chapter of about the same length to the doctrine of the Sabbath. Unlike Rice, Peckham does not end his book with Sabbath but includes it as chapter fifteen of nineteen. He does not have an opening set of relevant biblical quotations and references. Although he has no formal introduction, he includes some introductory remarks. Peckham begins with a unit from the Synoptic Gospels, “Grainfields on Sabbath,” drawing mainly from Matthew and Luke. He quotes Mark only from 2:27–28 on the purpose of the Sabbath—certainly not the historical mistake in 2:26. After moving to Sabbath healing in the synagogue that follows the grainfields unit, Peckham declares that, although these narratives focus on what not to do on Sabbath, there is no actual Sabbath breaking in either unit. He considers it deliberate that, immediately before these Sabbath-related units, Matthew has Jesus declare, “I will give you rest” and “you will find rest for your souls.”

Here, Peckham inserts one of his competing theories sections, “Competing Theories in Christian Theology: The Sabbath,” where he surveys various Christian views of Sabbath. These include dispensationalism, covenant theology, new covenant theology, and the Adventist view that the seventh-day Sabbath remains in effect. He contends that the change from Sabbath to Sunday was “complex” and “obscure,” that “Sunday did not begin to replace Sabbath as a day of rest until the fourth century” (500), that Sabbath keeping continued beyond the fifth century, and that there is no biblical support for Jesus’s resurrection as a validation for Sunday worship.

In Peckham’s next section, “The Story of Sabbath: Day of Rest, Grace, and Deliverance,” he asserts that the God who needs no rest rested on the seventh day. In a subsection, “Instituted at Creation,” he notes that the fourth commandment in Exodus 20 grounds Sabbath in creation, long before the existence of Israel. To demonstrate the widespread association of Sabbath with the seventh day, he includes a chart that shows the word “Sabbath” reflected in the names for the seventh day in ten languages.

Peckham’s section, “The Sabbath Was in Place among
Israel before Sinai,” seems like a logical extension of an assertion in the subsection of his previous section, i.e., Sabbath preceded the existence of Israel. He notes that God did not send manna on Sabbath before Sinai and that the Decalogue’s command to “remember the Sabbath” presumed its prior existence.

However, the remaining subsections depart from the section title and deal not with “Israel before Sinai” but with Sinai itself and beyond—including, but not sequentially, the times of Jesus and the apostles, Christianity in the end time, and various universal and timeless applications. The Sinai locus is reflected in “The Sabbath Commandment at Sinai as a Memorial of Creation” and “A Memorial of Liberation from Slavery and Oppression.” The beyond is discussed in rather random fashion in “The Universal and Particular Nature of the Sabbath,” “The Custom of Jesus,” “The Custom of the Apostles,” “The Sabbath and the Three Angels’ Message,” and “The Sabbath Gift Remains for Christians.” These strangely organized subsections contain ideas including: the Sabbath was not just for Jews; it was both universal and specific; it was observed by Jesus—even in death; it was rehabilitated by Jesus and not replaced by him; it was kept by the apostles; it was seen by Adventists to constitute the heart of the Three Angels’ Messages; and it remains a gift for Christians.27

Before concluding the chapter, Peckham addresses “Sabbath Theology: Sabbath as a Gift of Rest, Grace, Liberation, and Deliverance.” After an anecdote, he proceeds to address each assertion about the Sabbath in the section title. In “Day of Rest: A Temple in Time,” Peckham asserts that we all need physical and spiritual rest and time with God. Work days exist for the Sabbath, not the other way around. In “Day of Grace and Sign of Sanctification,” he claims that Sabbath represents the opposite of a works relationship with God. In “Day of Liberation and Justice,” he sees the Sabbath as a type of resistance to oppression and a time of pleasure, not burden. In “Day of Deliverance,” he finally ties all this to the book title: “The Sabbath is a day of deliverance provided by the God who is with us and wants to be even more closely with us still” (523).28

In his usual fashion, Peckham concludes the chapter with “Conclusion: Why Does It Matter?” He answers this simply: “The Sabbath provides sacred time for . . . relationship with God and with others” (524). What follows reads more like the call in a sermon than the end of a theological discourse.

As in most of his chapters, Peckham includes suggestions for further reading. The Adventist sources include Niels-Erik Andreasen, J. N. Andrews, Samuele Bacciocchi, Daniel Bediako, Jo Ann Davidson, Richard M. Davidson, Ron du Preez, Kenneth Strand, Sigve Tonstad, and Biblical Research Institute materials. Other writers suggested are Lynne M. Baab, Nathan A. Barack, Walter Brueggemann, Christopher John Donato, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Ched Myers, and A. J. Swoboda.

Comments
Both Rice and Peckham explore the scope of biblical material on Sabbath from the first creation story through the laws and other documents of the Old Testament to the New Testament and its portrayals of Jesus and the earliest Christians. However, Peckham is often more sectarian in reading and interpreting these materials.

The most obvious difference between these chapters on the Sabbath by Rice and Peckham is that Rice places this chapter at the end of his book, enabling it to both visually and functionally serve as the climax of his theological discourse—a final landing place for all his prior considerations to meet. Peckham treats the topic as just another theme among the whole, locating it as chapter fifteen at the end of part four, with four chapters in part five to follow. This is especially surprising for a book that purports to be “An Introduction to Adventist Theology” in contrast to Rice’s “An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective.” Rice treats the Sabbath theme with greater respect and attaches more significance to it than Peckham.

Both authors seem to have some problems with the organization of material in their Sabbath chapters, as noted above. In Rice’s section “The Sabbath in the Bible,” his subsections “The uniqueness of the sabbath”
and “The sabbath and the ten commandments” seem out of place. Likewise, Peckham’s section “The Sabbath Was in Place among Israel before Sinai” contains material that not only lies outside the chronological scope of the title but is also not presented in sequential order.

At times, both Rice and Peckham seem either unaware of critical biblical scholarship or simply choose to ignore it. For example, when discussing Paul and Sabbath, Rice refers only to material in Colossians, uncritically assuming that Paul was the author. It is common today among Pauline scholars to consider only seven letters attributed to Paul to be genuinely his, and Colossians is not among them. Peckham has a similar approach to Deuteronomy—uncritically considering it to be a composition by Moses—contrary to common Old Testament scholarship.

Rice conveys a more complete and realistic understanding of the history of Adventism regarding Sabbath—past and present—than Peckham. Unlike the later, the former acknowledges that Adventists received the Sabbath doctrine from Seventh Day Baptists and that in the 1960s began to explore the wider aspects of Sabbath regarding Christian faith and life.

One of the strangest parts of Peckham’s chapter is his material in the subsection he calls “The Sabbath and the Three Angels’ Message.” Here he falls victim to a common Adventist mistake. One may speak of the “three angels’ messages” or the “first, second, or third angel’s message.” However, there is no “three angels’ message”! Each angel makes a separate and distinct proclamation. There is no common message proclaimed by the three angels in Revelation 14:6–12. This is not a typographical mistake. He repeats this expression in the second sentence after the heading but later in the section shifts to “Three Angels’ Messages.”

The greater problem with Peckham’s interpretation of this part of Revelation is his contention that, although “the Sabbath is not mentioned directly, this allusion demonstrably points to the Sabbath commandment” (509). He tries unsuccessfully to establish this by employing a convoluted set of proof texts (Dan 7:25; Rev 14:9–12) to claim that the message of the third angel concerns Sabbath.

The writers’ invitations for further reading in this chapter exhibit significant differences, as they do throughout the books. Rice lists Adventist authors who mostly made substantial contributions to Adventist understanding of the doctrine of the Sabbath, especially during the latter part of the twentieth century. Peckham provides the names of nine Adventist authors—including himself—only three of whom were also recommended by Rice. Conversely, Peckham fails to include three major figures in the Adventist theology of Sabbath: Fritz Guy, Sakae Kubo, and Roy Branson (all incidentally from the progressive wing of Adventism). The same contrast exits in the lists of recommended authors outside Adventism. Rice mentions six, at least four of whom are widely recognized and acclaimed writers—Abraham Joshua Heschel, Karl Barth, Paul K. Jewett, and Jürgen Moltmann. Peckham lists eight authors, with only Heschel in common with Rice, and only two or three others who could be considered significant.

Whose book is this, anyway?
Rice seems to have independently planned, designed, and written his book through two editions and had them published by Andrews University Press. Despite the press holding copyright to both, the editions and their contents (except for routine copy editing) are his as author.

This same simple assessment cannot be made concerning the book by Peckham. The documented role played by the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) of the
General Conference forces one to conclude otherwise. Despite his name on the cover and title page, Peckham is not really the one responsible for “his” book. That role goes to BRI. I offer the following evidence:

- A news release from Andrews University and published by the Adventist Review gives priority to BRI by stating: “The General Conference Biblical Research Institute (BRI) and Andrews University have partnered to publish a book for general and classroom readers that theologically examines each of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s fundamental beliefs.”

- The copyright page indicates “Copyright 2023 by the Biblical Research Institute.”

- The copyright page also lists “Theological Editor / Frank M. Hasel” (associate director of BRI).

- The foreword was written by “Elias Brasil de Souza, Director / Biblical Research Institute / April 2023.”

- The suggested Adventist readings for fifteen chapters include “resources on the Biblical Research Institute website.”

- BRI seems to have a strategic plan to provide textbooks for Adventist education that included replacing Rice’s book.

- Andrews University acknowledged: “The book was commissioned and edited by BRI.”

Conclusion

Through two editions, Rice’s independent book seems to have served its purpose well. It is comprehensive and balanced in its representation of a variety of Adventist and other Christian views and writings on each topic. It is well organized; consistently focused on Scripture; includes tools for review, discussion, and biblical study; and it has a helpful subject index. The book is ideally suited for use in higher education—its purpose. It is sufficiently general and comprehensive to serve as an introduction to Christian theology and appropriately specific and denominational to provide its intended Seventh-day Adventist perspective.

Apart from the minor negatives I have noted, I would fault Rice’s book mainly on it being somewhat out-of-date. If, after twelve years, he felt it necessary to write a second edition, how much more is an update needed now after another twenty-seven years! Except for the strategy of the BRI, one wonders why Andrews University Press did not pursue that option with Rice.

Peckham’s book is not independent. It is the product of a plan, design, and monitored outcome by BRI and is published thereby with what amounts to the imprimatur of the General Conference—safe and orthodox. Furthermore, the book is often rambling and overly informal. It is distinctively conservative to the point of obsession with right-wing Adventist and evangelical ideas and a focus on writers from within and outside Adventism that espouse these views. This makes it ill-suited for use in higher education. At times, it is disorganized both in the scope of the book and in the exploration of its topics.

Given the unabashedly conservative orientation of Peckham’s book, it is quite surprising that Rice’s more progressive volume uniquely offers suggestions for further Bible study on its topics and lists Ellen White more often for additional reading. This conservative inclination no doubt accounts for the complete absence from Peckham’s recommendations for further reading many noteworthy and acclaimed progressive Adventist scholars of the last seventy-five years, e.g., Roy Branson, John Brunt, Jonathan Butler, Ray Cottrell, Larry Geraty, Ron Graybill, Hanz Gutierrez, Fritz Guy, Kendra Haloviak Valentine, Siegfried Horn, Sakae Kubo, Jim Londis, Graham Maxwell, Gottfried Oosterwal, Michael Pearson, Jack Provosnsha, Chuck Scriven, Alden Thompson, Gil Valentine, Edward Vick, Herold Weiss, Gerald Winslow, John Webster, and Norm Young. Most astonishing, however, is Peckham’s complete disregard of Rice’s book that his own volume is clearly intended to replace. His one mention of Rice in recommended readings is the latter’s Suffering and the Search for Meaning.

For me, this all suggests that Andrews University Press should have withstood the pressure from BRI to replace Rice’s Reign of God with Peckham’s God with Us. Instead, it should have invited Rice, or someone else like him, to do a third, updated edition of his book, suited for the twenty-first century, and promoted it vigorously.
and globally. Such a balanced and independent volume would serve the Church—especially its institutions of higher education and their students—better than one commissioned by Church leadership and edited by them to be safe and orthodox.

ENDNOTES:

1. The 404-page first edition of Rice’s book was The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1985). In the preface of the second edition, he states, “The present work is an attempt to provide, in one volume, an introduction to the major Christian doctrines that includes the distinctive concerns of Seventh-day Adventists*” (xiv).

2. Although the subtitles are the same, for some unexplained reason, the first edition had the title The Reign of God. In the preface to the second edition, Rice explains, “The title ‘The Reign of God,’ although ‘a major biblical theme,’ is more of a ‘leitmotiv, or a familiar reference point’” (xiv).

3. The first edition had its own preface and the same elements as the second edition, except that it also had indices of biblical references and persons.

4. The first edition chapters contained a titled page with relevant biblical quotations and references, the doctrinal discussion in one column with footnotes, and study helps like those of the second edition. In the preface to the second edition, Rice states that a new edition was needed because of changes in Adventism, Christianity, and the religious world and changes in his own thinking. Despite trying to “keep changes to a minimum,” the main changes in the second edition include: use of gender neutral words where possible, except for deity; changes for further reading; some rearrangement of chapters; integration of the concept of “reign of God” into chapter titles and contents; and a rewrite of chapters three and four on the doctrine of God (xi–xii).

5. It also contains an excursion on the Bible and theology after chapter ten.


7. Rice and Peckham demonstrate this in the subtitles of their books: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective (Rice) and An Introduction to Adventist Theology (Peckham).

8. For convenience, in these chapter discussions I list page references to Rice and Peckham in parentheses within the text.

9. Rice offers no biblical support for this. The emphases are his.


11. Genesis 1:2; Psalm 33:6; Proverbs 8:22ff.


13. Whereas Rice routinely capitalizes terms for deity but not the word “trinity,” Peckham always renders it “Sabbath.”


15. Whereas Rice does not capitalize “sabbath,” Peckham always renders it “Sabbath.”

16. The emphasis is his.

17. After he lists the biblical texts that, for him, affirm the Sabbath in Colossians 2:16, although controversial, was not against Sabbath keeping.

18. Rice, assuming that Colossians was Pauline, contends that the reference to Sabbath in Colossians 2:16, although controversial, was not against Sabbath keeping.


20. This would have demurred even Bill Clinton in his famous grand jury testimony on August 17, 1998. In response to a question, President Clinton replied: “It depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.” https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/bctes092198_4.htm, accessed February 19, 2024.


22. Rice, assuming that Colossians was Pauline, contends that the reference to Sabbath in Colossians 2:16, although controversial, was not against Sabbath keeping.

23. Rice’s chapter is twenty-eight pages (391–419); Peckham’s chapter is thirty pages (497–527).

24. Whereas Rice does not capitalize “sabbath,” Peckham always renders it “Sabbath.”


26. The emphasis is his.


28. The emphasis is his.

29. According to a BRI statement, the GC Committee created BRI in 1975. Having grown out of the Committee on Biblical Study and Research and its predecessor, the Defense Literature Committee (established 1952 and 1943 respectively), BRI’s role in the publication of Peckham’s book may internally be justified by BRI’s vision statement: “The BRI will be a leader in the exploration of biblical truth and the creation of cutting-edge biblical and theological resources to enhance the world church’s understanding and expression of its message, mission, and unity in a globally sensitive and relevant way.” Note also one of its service functions: “Facilitating publication of substantial theological books and articles.” However, the Peckham project is more likely related to two parts of BRI’s mission statement: (1) “Provide theological expertise and resources for the administration and departments of the General Conference and the world church” and (2) “Encourage and facilitate dialogue within the seventh-day Adventist theological community to foster doctrinal and theological unity in the world church.” Biblical Research Institute, Seventh-day Adventist Church, https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/about-us/. That is to say, it is a theological watch dog to detect dissent and assist church leaders to eliminate it.


33. Peckham, ix–x. Ironically, de Souza’s foreword includes things about the book and its purpose that one would normally expect to find in Peckham’s preface.

34. This is the only source other than specific authors listed in reading suggestions. Of the seventeen chapters with reading suggestions, only two do not include BRI resources.

35. Peckham, i. “Although this orientation is clearly the intention of the BRI, it also fitly characterizes Peckham’s work. As an example, Peckham identifies the role of the BRI in its work. Peckham states: ‘The BRI will be a leader in the exploration of biblical truth and the creation of cutting-edge biblical and theological resources to enhance the world church’s understanding and expression of its message, mission, and unity in a globally sensitive and relevant way.’” Peckham, ix–x.


37. As one person opined, this amounts to a narrowing of Adventism—maybe that was the intent.

38. Although this orientation is clearly the intention of the BRI, it also fitly characterizes John Peckham. Most of his publications and presentations are with conservative, evangelical presses, journals, and societies. Both he and his editor at the Adventist Review (Justin Kim) are members of the conservative Adventist Theological Society, and both participate in meetings of the right-wing Adventist youth organization, Generation of Youth for Christ (GYC)—formerly known as the General Youth Conference)—most recently in February 2024. Kim is a co-founder and current board member of GYC.

39. While Peckham includes White ten times in suggested readings, Rice recommends her thirty-one times.

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BRIAN BULL, MD (1937—2022) served Loma Linda University as professor and chair of the Department of Pathology and Human Anatomy as well as the dean of the School of Medicine (1994-2003). He edited Blood Cells, an international hematology journal, and authored over 200 scientific articles, book chapters, and monographs.

FRITZ GUY, PHD (1930—2023) was the founding president and research professor of philosophical theology at La Sierra University. As a writer, editor, and pastor, he influenced several generations of Seventh-day Adventists. He is also the author of Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith (1999).

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